

COTE SMITH

You Were Here

Dave is a good dad, which means he dies every time. The boys are the good guys, which means they always win. But how to explain, in light of recent events, that there are real dangers out there. That there is a man running around, an escapee, who wants to hurt their dad. A man who once promised in court, in front of the judge, jury, and God, that if he ever got out of prison, he would find Dave and kill him.

You're dead, Dad, Brett says. I killed your face.

Brett is the eldest, nine to Otis's seven. Dave is the Police Chief of Leavenworth, a tiny town in Kansas that wouldn't exist if not for its prisons. One federal, one state, one for women.

Die, Dad, Otis says. Death to Dad.

The game is not meant to be violent. Cops 'n' Criminals, which Dave invented, is intended to educate, to show the boys there is a right and wrong way of doing things. There are laws and procedures, boys, rules that must be followed. You can't burst into the bad guys' lair guns blasting. You must announce yourself. You must wait until a threat is presented. Take Kern, for example, the convict who wants to kill Dave. If Dave saw him downtown, whistling against a parking meter, Dave could not walk up and open fire. But if Kern showed up here, at Dave's

duplex, machete in hand, foaming at the mouth, swinging for the boys' faces—

"Say it, Dad," Brett says, plastic gun aimed at Dave's head. Otis looks on with glee.

"Say what?"

"Dad, say it."

Dave smiles. He slumps on the couch and puts both hands over his bullet wound. "Why?" he says. "Why'd you do it, copper? I ain't done nothing to nobody."

The boys laugh. Dave coughs, he sputters. He widens his eyes and imagines what it will be like when he is gone but his boys are not.

"Alas," he says. "Woe is me."

Dave takes the boys to the video store. He lets them rent whatever they want as long as they don't tell their mother. The boys race to the horror section. On the cover of Otis's selection, a slimy ghoul pops out of a toilet. Brett's choice, *Confederate Wolfman*, details the harrowing journey of a Southern black werewolf who "enlists with a heavy heart" to fight for the North.

"Ah," Dave says. "A period piece."

He slides the picks across the counter to Katy, the cashier, a twenty-something Dave has slept with twice. Once during his marriage, and

once when the divorce was final. Once at her place, and another when he had the boys for the weekend. He made Katy go out the window in the morning so as not to confuse Otis, who was already up eating cereal. Dave hasn't called her since.

Katy snickers at the wolfman. "Great parenting, Chief. Maybe later you can leave them in the woods with a box of matches." She rings them up. "Or maybe you and me can go camping. You know, just us adults."

Dave looks into Katy's eyes, into her shirt. He knows he should politely say no, and that the lie he is about to tell will only get him into more trouble down the road. He's always possessed the keen ability to perceive a bad decision he made as he made it. He called it his sixth sense. But he needed a seventh to make him listen to the sixth.

"Sounds like fun," he says, "I'll give you a call."

Brett okays watching Otis's movie first. Dave and the boys settle in front of the TV with pork rinds and a two-liter of Mountain Dew. The movie isn't half-bad. At least the writers gave the ghouls an origin story. Apparently a lazy scientist flushed a test tube of leftover chemicals down the toilet, transforming the city's homeless, who had taken to the sewers for shelter. So there was an environmental theme. Or was it a moral about the poor? Either way. But then the cop killing begins. Not uncommon for these movies, and normally Dave would point out all the mistakes they make and use them as a teaching moment. *See, you never do that. You don't go in alone. You call backup.* Or, *Oh, c'mon, he didn't even slice the*

pie. But now? Now a ghoul is gnawing off some fat cop's face. Now the ghoul slices the cop open and flushes his intestines down the toilet to share with the ghoul's ghoul buddies. None of it looks real—food coloring and corn syrup. And yet. Dave puts the pork rinds down. The boys chug their Mountain Dew, minds engrossed. Despite the sugar and violence, they will sleep well tonight. Dave will not. Dave will spend hours in the bathroom regretting what he ate, peering into the bowl and thinking of ghouls, of Kern. He will say a prayer, his stomach churning, and wait for the pain to come.

Kim, the boys' mother, lives in an apartment complex across town, shitty except for the pool. When school lets out for the summer, as it has now, the boys spend entire days in the water. Sometimes Kim goes with them. Sometimes she does not. Sometimes she goes to work at the golf course and leaves the boys to fend for themselves. Dave knows this because he has a patrol car swing by every day and check on the boys, under the guise of giving out free baseball cards. At night Dave drives by himself. He parks his Crown Vic, cuts the engine, and listens. To the crickets. To nothing. He watches tenants slink to and fro. He sees Kim leave late for the graveyard shift at the golf course. Lately she's gotten rides from Rick, a jerk from work who used to flirt with Kim right in front of Dave when the two were still together.

Tonight Rick parks and goes inside with a bottle and video. He doesn't leave until after three, giving Dave plenty of time to start and

finish the six-pack of Coors he keeps in the trunk for emergencies. The beer is light and warm, and Dave's mind swims with possibilities. It is possible, he thinks, that they are simply watching a very long movie. Or that Rick makes his move and Kim rejects him. Or why couldn't Rick get sick? On wine instead of pork rinds. Why couldn't a ghoulish eat Rick's face?

Dave laughs.

Or maybe Kern could show up here. Maybe he could break in and mistake Rick for Dave. Two birds, Dave thinks, then starts the car and drives home. He parks crookedly in the driveway. The front porch light is on, though Dave cannot remember turning on a porch light his entire life. He staggers to the door. Something crunches beneath his feet. Glass. The storm door window is busted. A fat rock sits on the doormat. Dave checks the door. Still locked. He turns around, his skin electric. But there is no one he can see. There is the night, black. There is the field across the street. There is the chill of a breeze, the sea of grass, swaying.

Dave sleeps in the cruiser to play it safe. In the morning he will inspect the duplex. He will not call for backup, out of embarrassment, but he will slice the pie. He will clear each room slowly and find nothing at all. He will find he has seen too many movies. He will find the uselessness of a wild imagination.

But what if? What if Kern had been in his duplex? Sitting at the kitchen table, big in his overalls, knife in his hand. What would Dave

say? I'm sorry I arrested you for beating your wife? I'm sorry I couldn't stop the internal bleeding and you got ten years for manslaughter instead of one for battery. Dave remembers the indignant look on Kern's face when the judge read his sentence. The way his jaw clenched with disbelief. How did I get here? that look said. The guard pulled Kern from his chair, and Kern searched the courtroom desperate for an explanation, for a familiar face that could tell him what just happened to his life. He saw no one. He saw Dave. He saw the man responsible for every woe he would endure for a decade and he cursed him. He spit on the floor and said one day he would get out. He said one day he would come knocking, and when he did, Dave was dead.

Dave goes to the station, endures work. No one mentions Kern or the threat, which a week ago was all anyone talked about. Still alive, eh Chief? they would joke. Better lock up tight tonight! Now, nothing. Am I even here? Dave wonders. Is any of this really happening?

The boys will make him feel better. They always do, and the irony is not lost on Dave. He never wanted kids. Now they are the greatest thing he has ever done, will ever do. Now he wishes he would have spent less time in his twenties living for himself. Stepping out on Kim, drinking late with friends who, well, what did they really matter? They were no Otis and Brett. They were selfish assholes.

He meets Kim at Cody Park, the halfway point between his place and hers. The boys climb out of her van and walk heads down to the back

of Dave's cruiser. It looks like a prisoner transfer.

"Thanks for taking them early," Kim says. "Keep an eye on Brett, would you? He's been acting out lately."

Dave nods, studies the bags under Kim's eyes. She must have had an early morning at work after her late night with Rick.

"You OK?" Kim says. "You don't look so hot."

Dave looks down at the sweat-stained T-shirt he slept in last night. "You really like him?"

"Who?" Kim says, then understands. She shrugs. "As much as I like anyone else these days." She turns for the van, but stops at the door. "You sure you're all right?"

"Just work stuff," Dave says. "You read the paper?"

"Can't afford it. Somebody's behind on child support."

She smiles at him and Dave wishes he could smile back. "Sorry," he says. "I'll do better."

A cop eats it in the first act. His bereaved widow, an amateur Wiccan, brings him back to life. Only she doesn't get the spell right. Once revived, the cop has a flesh fetish. He eats the churchgoing neighbors. Their children. He arrests the innocent, uses the county jail as his personal pantry. A gang of teens wises up after a friend gets eaten at a search and seizure. Lieutenant Lazarus, they call him. He must be stopped. They set up traps. Commit crimes to lure him out. He pulls a boy over for speeding, and when Lazarus bends down to ask for title, registration, and whatever limb the teen will miss the least, the boy blows

Lazarus's head off.

Lazarus comes back.

They set fire to a library, lasso Lazarus and burn him to a crisp.

His wife revives.

They stake his heart, shoot him with silver. They drop him down a grain elevator, and still, he subsists. Crippled and malformed, but appetite undiminished.

"Why doesn't he die?" Otis asks. "He needs to die."

The wind beats the front door. It sounds like someone is knocking. Something wants in.

"He can't," Brett says. "The witch won't let him."

Otis shakes his head. He wants to cover his eyes, but won't in front of his brother. "But look at him."

Lazarus climbs out of a tub of acid, skin sizzling. An eye dangles out of its socket like a tetherball.

Dave stops the tape. "That's enough for tonight," he says. "Brush up for bed."

Brett protests. "But you always let us finish."

"I know. Maybe another time." Dave ejects the tape. He'll keep it on his dresser, so the boys won't sneak out and watch it in the middle of the night.

"What's wrong, scumbag?" Brett says, using his tough cop voice. "You scared?"

Dave carries Otis to bed, tucks them in. He wonders what kind of boy Brett will be. Otis is sweet like his mother. But Brett? How will Kim control him if Dave's not around?

“Hey, punk,” Brett says, “I’m talking to you.”

Dave kisses Otis on the forehead, squeezes Brett’s arm. “Goodnight, you ghouls.” He turns off the light and shuts the door. A moment later, in his own bed, he hears a voice. He knows it’s Brett, still in character, calling from the boys’ room, but there is something slightly terrifying about the way his words echo down the dark hall.

“This isn’t over,” the voice says. “You hear me? I’m just getting started.”

The storm knocks out the power, wakes Dave from a dream he can’t quite remember. It was something sexual, though. Flashes of a woman’s mouth, a shadow on its knees. Kim, maybe. That time at her parents’ house, when they dared each other in the kitchen while her mom and dad slept above. Dave slides down his boxers. Rain beats the window above his bed. It takes longer than it used to, Dave finds. Harder to focus, and afterward he feels way more depressed than he ever did in his twenties. He wipes off, wide awake, and decides to check on the breaker, the boys.

A strong gust swirls around the living room. The front door is open, and Otis stands in the doorway, aiming a flashlight into the dark.

“Oat, what the hell are you doing?”

He pushes Otis out of the way and shuts the door.

“Someone was knocking,” Otis says.

Dave takes the flashlight. “It’s just the wind.”

“I heard a voice.”

Dave peeks through the peephole. Darker

than dark. The steady grumble of thunder. He waits for a flash of lightning to reveal what is out there. But the flash never comes.

“Your brother put you up to this?” Otis shakes his head. The power comes back on. Electronics buzz to life. Dave marches Otis to the kitchen. “So, this voice you heard? What did it say?”

Otis grins. In Cops ’n’ Criminals, the kitchen is where the cops hold suspects, conduct interrogations. “I want my lawyer,” Otis says.

“Hey, there’s no need for that. We’re just a couple of guys shootin’ the bull.”

“I please the fifth.”

Dave laughs. “Oh you do, huh? Well OK.” He goes to the fridge and pours a tall cup of Mountain Dew. He takes a drink, exaggerates an ah. “Oh, I’m sorry. You look thirsty. Would you like a sip?” He sits down and puts the cup just out of Otis’s reach. “Then tell me: What were you doing up? Why were you downstairs to begin with?”

“The storm. I couldn’t get back to sleep. Brett snores.”

He reaches for the cup, but Dave pulls it away. “That’s it? You weren’t, say, looking for the tape? You didn’t want to watch the rest of the movie?”

Otis lowers his head. At his age, he falls easily in and out of character. He cannot help but be the sweet boy he is meant to be. “Yes, I mean, but the power.” He slumps in his chair. “I heard something. I swear.”

Dave nods. He leans back, strokes the mustache he grew when he joined the force and that Kim always hated.

“OK, I believe you.” He slides the cup across the table, but pulls it back at Otis’s touch. “One last question,” he says. “How often does Rick come over to your mom’s?”

Otis looks up from the cup. Dave can feel his sixth sense twitch.

“Forget it. I ain’t telling you nothing.”

“Have it your way,” Dave says, and starts gulping the Mountain Dew.

“No, Dad! Stop! I’ll talk. He’s come over twice, I think. Maybe three.”

“Twice, huh.”

“Yeah. He makes us French toast.”

“For dinner?”

“No. In the morning. For breakfast.”

Dave nearly drops the Mountain Dew. The word breakfast has hit him particularly hard, and he feels a sharp pain around his heart. He could be dying, he thinks. He could keel over right now, in front of his son, and by default, by virtue of the fact no one would do anything to save him, the world would say that was OK.

But it’s only heartburn. The pork rinds.

“We done here, copper?” Otis says. The cup is empty. He must’ve chugged while Dave was busy not dying.

“Yeah,” Dave says. “Go to bed.” He rubs his chest. “Wait,” he says, catching Otis on the stairs. “The voice. You never told me. What’d it say?”

Otis thinks for a second. His mouth dips the same way as his brother’s when Brett’s about to lie.

“It was Lieutenant Lazarus. He said he’s ready to die.”

•

It’s possible, of course, that no one talks to Dave at work because they are afraid. For Dave. For what his situation reminds them of. Most escapees are caught a day or two after their escape. Hiding in a farmer’s barn. Stalking the grounds of a pined-for loved one. But who did Kern have? His one love he killed. His parents, Dave discovered, wanted nothing to do with their troubled son. It’d been nearly two weeks and everyone, the COs, the KBI, were clueless. Where do you run to, Dave wondered, when no one wants you, and nowhere means a thing?

When he gets off, Dave runs by the video store to return the boys’ movies. Katy tells him he never called about camping. He tells Katy she might not see him for a while.

“Why’s that, Chief? Kern finally catch up with you?”

Dave gives his best fake laugh. He likes it when most people call him chief. Likes how the title makes him feel he’s accomplished something. But in Katy’s mouth, the word always sounds dirty or insincere, like the punch-line to a joke Dave never understood.

“No,” Dave says. “No more movies.”

Katy stops cleaning the candy case. She examines the cover of *Lieutenant Lazarus*, the dirt-caked hand popping out a grave, wielding a nightstick. “Oh, so now you’re too good for the cinema.”

“Too much violence,” Dave says. “Can’t be good for the boys.”

“Sure,” Katy says. “The boys.” Dave can see

she is upset. He sees her waiting by the phone after the nights they spent together. He sees Kim waiting up while he was out with Katy. "So that's it? We've got other genres, you know. Doesn't have to be all gloom and doom."

Dave opens his mouth, but he doesn't know what to say. Katy shakes her head, mutters fine, whatever. She slides off the tape's cover, checks if it's rewind.

"You know what your problem is?" Katy says, setting the tape down. She fingers the "Please Rewind" sticker on the front of the tape. "You forgot to be kind."

Dave feels better after ending things with the video store. Freer, somehow, more hopeful. He has no idea what he will do with the boys that weekend in place of watching movies. (Take them to a museum, maybe? Does Leavenworth even have a museum?) Still. They can always play another round of Cops n' Criminals. Dave can make them take the game more seriously. He can prepare them for the seriousness of the world, for whatever terrible things it will bring.

But first, work. A week of Dave dealing with the minutiae of a town 99.9 percent of the world doesn't know exists. While the KBI searches for Kern, Dave goes after drunks, middle-aged men unaware that the days of drinking with impropriety were over. It is an uphill battle. More than once Dave had been called into some backwoods bar to talk down a forty-something who'd pissed away his life and was now just realizing it. More than once Dave had been

socked in the face, dropped to his knees by men who possessed a different strength than Dave's generation. These men whom Dave would read about in a police report a month later. Who'd wrap their trucks around trees, kick their kids, punch their wives. Wasn't Kern one of them? Hadn't the previous chief looked the other way on more than one occasion? Wasn't Dave the one who finally put a stop to him, albeit a little late? Wasn't that the right, the *kind* thing to do? And yet the resentment. Even from his fellow officers, whose fathers knew these men, whose fathers were these men.

Oh well. It takes time for people to change. Dave is living proof. Or he is on his way to becoming living proof. He is living anyway. He takes a long lunch to get out of the office. He cruises around town, swings by Kim's apartment complex to check on the boys, knowing it's Kim's day off. The boys are playing in the pool. They don't see Dave, who watches them from a distance. Brett flips off the diving board, teases Otis to the point of tears for being too afraid to do the same. Dave needs to teach Brett a lesson. About humility, about always looking out for his brother. That's the next step. First, cut out the bad. Second, bring on the good. But that can wait.

Kim is disappointed to see him. She swears she's just in a rush to get to work, but Dave knows better. He follows her into the kitchen as she searches for her keys. Was she expecting Rick? Thus the touch of makeup?

"There's a little coffee left," Kim says, before

disappearing into the living room. "Help yourself."

Dave pours a cup, spies Kim's keys behind the creamer. He puts them in his pocket, sits at the tiny kitchen table and waits.

"No luck?" he says, when Kim returns, frustrated, hands on hips.

"What do you want?" Her tired, hard face shreds Dave's mental script of how this would go.

"Who watches the boys," Dave says, "while you're at work?"

"I've got a neighbor to check on them. They're fine."

"I could take them. For the rest of the day. I could take off work."

Kim squints at him with suspicion, an expression frequently found in their marriage's end of days. "You had your chance," she says, "over the weekend."

Dave nods. He runs his hand over the keys in his pocket. "Do you want to sit down for a second?"

"I'm going to be late," Kim says, but sits anyway. Dave looks at her across the table, which once sat in their old house's tiny dining room. He glances to his left, where a baby Brett once smeared spaghetti on his face. To his right, an empty chair awaiting the arrival of Otis. He stares at Kim's face. He wonders if she feels it too.

"I was thinking," Dave says, "maybe we could do something with the boys. Take them to the park or something. Together."

Kim folds her arms across her chest. It would be so easy, Dave realizes, for her to destroy him.

To laugh in his face and remind him what a terrible husband he turned out to be. You didn't even want to keep Otis. Remember? At this table, you sat there, eating a breadstick, and said I should get rid of it.

But she doesn't say any of these things. Because she still has that kindness about her. An irresistible quality that made her so easy to love, and even easier to hurt.

"You know what I think," she says with a slight smirk. "I think you've seen one too many movies. Now help me find my keys."

How to explain how he felt after that. Lazarus would do. He felt like he'd come back from the dead, only to have his heart sucked out and put in a blender. The teens tried that too. Puréed the vitals. And still, Lazarus was forced to walk the earth. Resurrected by his wife so she could look him in the eye one more time and tell him what a disappointment he had been.

Dave is filled with a thousand questions. But there are no answers. There is only beer. There is Dave dragging a six-pack to the abandoned battery factory. It is night now, and the four-storied building looms in front of him like a dormant volcano. The factory once was the city's second-biggest source of jobs, behind the prisons. Dave worked there a few summers after high school. It was awful, but it beat the penitentiary. It beat having to look over your shoulder every goddamn minute. Dave cracks his second-to-last beer. And now, gone. The jobs shipped overseas, where they dine on fine beaches, watch

the sun dip into the ocean, heads resting softly on Rick's shoulder.

Screw it, Dave thinks. He cannonballs his beer and kicks down the door boarding up the factory. Inside it's dark and reeks of drifter piss. Dave grabs his police light from the trunk. He waves it lazily around the first floor, splashing yellow over archaic machinery. All of it useless, all of it left behind. He runs the light over concrete walls tagged with graffiti. Curse words and zip codes, people encased by hearts, summed together. On one wall, in big block letters, someone wrote YOU WERE HERE. "You" is underlined, for emphasis maybe, though its letters are in a different colored paint, like someone filled in the blank, like "you" could be anyone.

Dave puts his hand against the wall. At first he thinks the thumping from above is thunder. Another storm moving in when he wasn't looking. But there's a high-pitched whine, too, like one of the machines is coming to life. Dave staggers towards the stairwell. He knows this goes against all the advice he's given the boys. Never go alone. Always wait for backup. There's safety in numbers. He can't help himself, though, not after Kim and the beer. He's a cop responding to a call. That's all.

The upstairs is a good place for a nightmare. Busted up battery shells litter the floor, wires hanging out like a robot that got its head lopped off. Every shadow is a monster. Every unlit corner, a creature's lair. Dave shuffles to a far window. Touch the pane and you can leave, he thinks, daring himself, taking his life and making it a

game. And why not? Isn't that how he felt? Like life had given him the die, and, sure, he'd had a few good rolls, but now it was someone else's turn. When he finally makes it to the window, he finds the glass is missing. A breeze whistles through the hole, breathing life to the machinery around him. Dave thinks of his busted door. He thinks of Kern. What a great place to hide this would be. What a great time to sneak up and stab someone in the back.

That weekend Dave stays in the car while the boys rent the videos. He watches Katy ring them up, glance the direction Dave is parked. She can't see him, Dave knows, not at night. The lights inside are too bright. But he can see her. Lowering her head. Taking the boys' money, asking them to have a nice night.

"What say we play a game?" Dave says after dinner. Boiled dogs and beans, after grilling was nixed by the rain. The boys clean their plates and grab the guns.

"I want to be the bad guy," Brett says.

"No, you don't," Dave says, and finishes the beer he's drinking instead of Mountain Dew.

"Yes I do. When you're bad, you can do whatever you want."

Brett fake shoots his brother in the face.

"What about you, Oat?" Dave says. "You want to be bad, too?" Otis looks at his brother. He doesn't say yes or no. "Fine. If that's what you want. You be bad. I'll be good."

Dave goes down to the basement, counts to ten and returns. From the doorway he announces

who he is. LVPD. No response. He slices the pie. He spies Brett on the couch, watching TV nonchalantly. It's a page out of Dave's playbook. The casual criminal. The bad guy who plays it cool with a shotgun behind his back.

"Come on in," Brett says, "the water's fine."

Otis sits on the loveseat, unsure about his new role. Dave keeps his gun trained on Brett. He tells him to get off the couch, slowly. He tells him he's under arrest.

"For what, copper? I ain't done nothing."

"Murder, son."

"Murder? Man, I ain't hurt a fly." Brett laughs to himself, but turns off the TV. He sits up straighter. "And I ain't your son."

Dave watches Brett's hand drift behind his back. "Don't do it," he says.

"Don't do what? Just got an itch is all."

"Get up."

"All right, all right. Don't get your panties in a bunch."

"Turn around," Dave says. Normally this is where Dave might go for the gun tucked into the back of his shorts, let Brett and Otis riddle his body with bullets. But Brett is clean, which means—

"Hands up," Otis says. He presses the shotgun into Dave's back.

Dave smiles, drops his pistol. "OK, son. You got me."

"Yeah, we got you," Brett says. "We got you good. Now get on your knees."

Dave drops. He hears a knock at the door, but tells himself it's only the storm. "Think about

what you're doing. I've got a wife."

"No you don't," Brett says. "Your wife's got a Rick. You've got nothing."

"I've got kids."

Brett punches Dave in the stomach, hard enough that Dave doesn't have to act when he crumples to the floor. "Quiet!" Brett says. "You've got nothing anymore. Understand?" He kicks him in the back. "The good times are over. Now it's time for the bad."

Another kick, right in the ribs.

If Dave lives until tomorrow, he will explain to Kim what happened like this: We were playing a game, and, well, things got out of control. You warned me about Brett, but I only half-listened. You can put that on my grave. Here lies Dave; he only half-listened. But he was listening then. He was hearing what Brett had become. He was watching Otis look on and he knew he had to do something. So in a flash he grabbed Brett's legs and yanked them out from under him. Caught Brett off guard, even though he told the boys to always be alert. Never assume a threat is over.

Brett doesn't put his hands up. The back of his head hits the coffee table with a wet smack, and now he is crying.

Outside there's a boom of thunder. Inside, the power flickers off, then on again.

Dave stands up, puts a foot on Brett's back. "Not so bad now, are you?"

"He's bleeding," Otis says. And sure enough, Brett is. Dave can see the small stamp of blood matted in his son's hair as he rolls him over and slips on the plastic cuffs. "Is he going to be OK?"

Brett closes his eyes. Otis starts to sniffle. “Is he going to die?”

“Of course not,” Dave says, but now Brett has stopped crying. He stops making any noise of any sort. Heavy rain pounds the roof. Lightning strikes nearby, and Dave wants to hug his sons. To ignore the lesson and say he is sorry. He didn’t mean to.

Dave points his gun at Otis. “Get away from him. Put down the weapon.”

“Dad,” Otis says, and crouches over Brett. He asks his brother if he’s all right. He commands him to be OK, begs like a B-movie star.

“Hey scumbag,” Dave says. “It’s over. You’re coming with me.”

“Leave me alone,” Otis says, and keeps his back turned. “You didn’t have to do that. Why’d you do that?”

“I don’t see any other good guys around,” Dave says. “Do you?”

Otis leans in and whispers something to Brett. A vow of revenge, maybe. Or a spell to bring him

back from the dead.

He turns to Dave with a ghoulish look Dave has never seen before. So serious, so angry.

“You’re not good,” Otis says. “You’re just pretending.”

He picks up his gun and aims it at Dave.

“Oat, stop. I’m trying to help you.”

“I ain’t Otis,” Otis says. “Not no more.” He backs away from Dave, down the hall.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m Kid Lazarus. And you may have killed my brother, but you can’t hurt me.”

Otis stops backtracking. He is at the door now. The rain has turned into hail, knocking on the walls, the ceiling.

“Son,” Dave says, “everyone can be hurt.”

A brighter flash. A deeper rumble. And there’s that knock at the door. The hail. A rock. There’s Kern come to collect, and there’s Oat, twisting the handle.

“Well let’s see,” Otis says. “Let’s see who can hurt the worst.” 