

Runaway

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Published: 2008
in »Killer Year«



The two boys pumped their dirt bike pedals, sweating and heaving through backwoods trails and into Jeremy's yard where they found that their fort, rebuilt from tree-house debris that had fallen after an ice storm, had been breached—the blue tarp bunched aside, the padlocked hinge on their secret cellar trapdoor busted. Auden kicked aside the useless padlock and lifted open the door. There in the dark underbelly was a black girl their age they'd never seen before, and she was jabbing a serrated kitchen knife at them, baring her teeth, squinting at the summer daylight flooding in. She was down as deep as a grave, so even her head was underground and the sun didn't shine past her shoulders.

„Holy shit,” Auden said, but he didn't budge even when her knife tip sliced across the empty eyelets on his hightops. Behind him, Jeremy gasped at the girl and stumbled back against a flimsy plywood wall.

The boys were both fifteen, three weeks short of tenth grade. Just that morning they'd biked almost five miles out to a construction site, taking one pit stop at the

Quickie on Rural Route 104 for tubes of Necco wafers and Slushee ice drinks that they drowned with every flavor until it turned black. Jeremy also bought Junior Mints even though, or because, he hated how much he ate, hated being able to squeeze the blubber around his belly like it was raw pizza dough. In the trees on the edge of a cabbage field they'd drunk their tongues purple, then chewed some tobacco that Auden had stolen from the store and stuffed in a cargo pocket on his camouflage shorts. They spit out the chew and then ate Neccos to kill the putrid aftertaste. For a while Auden told Jeremy that story about visiting his older brother's college for the weekend, how Auden got drunk on Goldschläger and kicked the shit out of this college guy and fingered this chick who thought he was a high school senior. Jeremy had heard it all before, but he liked the details—gold flakes in the booze, meaty punches, the girl's warm wetness.

They stood on the pedals when the canal path got steep and grunted through the pain, both of them—Auden in the lead, shirtless and sunburnt, Jeremy trailing in a drenched-out HARD ROCK CAFÉ ORLANDO tee. The construction site was mostly plain orange earth tilled up by backhoes. Where weeks before there had been forest, now there were twelve cinder-block foundations scattered on twelve acres of ground. It was almost like how the boys had excavated their bunker with spades and then dragged over the old fallen tree-house carcass to conceal it.

With Jeremy as lookout, Auden sat inside a backhoe cab and cranked the gears. He climbed down a concrete wall and scored a wayward nail gun and fired it at the dirt and at the sun. He acrobat-walked a plank laid across somebody's someday basement, and he bounced until the plank bowed and crackled. Auden was all taut-strung tendons, visible veins, and skinned-chicken muscles. He had a rat tail worming down between his shoulder blades and a scar branded where collar meets shoulder—an inch-long slit that whitened when the rest of him got scorched.

Jeremy stood where gravel would soon become an asphalt rink for street hockey, for darting pets, for SUV tires easing home in the workday dusk. He saw how the road would someday feed into driveways and into homes. He read the contractor's spiel on a billboard—YOUR DREAM HOUSE IS BECOMING A REALITY! TEN ROOMS! A HUNDRED CUSTOM CHOICES! STARTING LOW 200S!—and he thought about his own house just over the county line, a half mile from the trailer park where Auden lived. It was one floor, two bedrooms, with unpainted siding, no basement, no air-conditioning, oil heat from a tank outside—hardly better than the tree house that Jeremy's dad had built for him one year before splitting from upstate New York for higher pay and warmer winters in Virginia.

Jeremy lifted his bike from where it was propped against a lumber pile. He didn't want to be here anymore. He wanted to leave before one of the sleeping yellow machines sparked to life and crushed him into grist for making lawns grow green. Auden saw him retreating and trotted over, heckling, powdered with sawdust. He aimed the nail gun at Jeremy's head and said, „You don't deserve to live.”

Jeremy collapsed onto the dirt and pressed his face into his shoulder.

Auden said, „I’m just messing, dude. Look at these houses not even built and I want to burn them already. They’re gonna all look the same when they’re done, just like all the assholes who are gonna come live in them.”

On the way home, they left the canal trail and climbed down a grassy ravine toward a shallow pond where before they’d seen tadpoles churning like black sperm. They were trespassing on someone’s marshy backyard where a lopsided swing set was sinking into the ground and where a dull brown Chihuahua yapped furiously at them, tearing up grass divots at the limit of its chain. The tadpoles were now thumb-size frogs that Auden scooped up from the reeds and loaded into his cargo pocket. Jeremy watched from the property line. Auden climbed eight pegs on a telephone pole and hung one-handed from that height, grabbing handfuls of frogs from his pocket and chucking them at the Chihuahua. The dog squealed and flipped and sneezed so hard its whole head shuddered, even though it was never exactly hit. Finally, the corkscrew spike ripped from the dirt and the dog sprinted off through the woods with that spike on the end of its chain leaping along behind it.

That was just minutes before they discovered that their safe hideaway had been invaded by this girl from out of nowhere threatening with her knife and yelling, „You fuckers back up. I said back up!”

„Hey, chill out,” Auden said. He showed her his palms, but he couldn’t keep from snickering and tossing wide-eyed nods at Jeremy. He wasn’t afraid. He was like a dog made to beg for a treat.

„Who you people?” the girl asked.

„This is our fort, man. Who’re you?” Auden said.

„I don’t got to tell.” She was straining to peer at them over the edge of the hole, and her outstretched arm was resting on the floor now, easy enough for one of them to stomp on her wrist and pry her knife away—but Auden was closer and didn’t seem to want this to end fast or simple.

„Look, if you’re in trouble we ain’t gonna turn you in. Right, Jere?”

Jeremy nodded. He pressed a hand against the plywood wall, against the jutting nails he and Auden had driven in by the handfuls last summer when they’d stitched this broken refuge back together again. He pressed until the nails almost punctured his skin.

The girl said: „You want to know what? I just busted out from juvey.”

„Where’s that?” Auden said. „Nowhere near here.”

“I come all this way walking and hitchhiking. For real.”

“It’s cool,” Auden told her. “We won’t say nothing to nobody.”

The girl snorted „uh-huh,” but she withdrew her arm anyway. Her fingers were empty when they came back up from the dark. She said, „Help me out.”

Auden helped yank her onto the fort floor. Jeremy watched as she rose from that trench he’d dug from scratch, that he’d stocked with empty beer bottles and broken action figures, smut mags, a liter jug of Morley’s Discount Vodka that he’d bought with lunch money from Auden’s older brother, a couple flashlights to browse the magazines with.

She’d been inside there—this girl who was like nobody he’d ever known, not even like the couple of black kids at his school—and now she surfaced in nothing but a pair of jeans and a grimy gray bra, soiled tennis shoes for her bare feet. Her

skin was such a deep shade that it was almost purple, much darker than her rusty hair twined in thin cornrows. Her lips were dry brown except where her tongue slicked them moist. She smelled like Far East spice and hot asphalt, and she grabbed him by the shoulder to right her balance. In fifteen years Jeremy had never been touched by anyone who was so alien that only her palms and her fingertips, colored like his own, seemed believable.

„What’s your name?” Jeremy said.

„Never mind that. What was I thinking, running off? Might as well turn me in for all I care. Look. I had to steal these pants that’s too small.” She slapped both sides of her unbuttoned waistband to show where it dug tracks into her skin. Jeremy saw that she’d also stuck her knife through a belt loop on her hip, keeping it close at hand.

He asked, „Are you hungry?”

„Naw. I was drinking some a’ that hard shit y’all got down there.”

„You know,” Auden said, „you didn’t need to tell us you were from juvey.”

„I ain’t. I lied. Really I took off from home ’cause I hate my dad. I been on the road five days and—shit—I don’t even know where I am, tell the truth.”

„You’re nowhere, that’s where,” Auden said.

„I can get you some food, really,” Jeremy said.

„Might as well,” she said. „And call the cops while you at it, tell them you got Rhonda Peach trapped in your little elf house.”

„Don’t do that,” Auden said, grabbing Jeremy’s wrist to prove he was serious.

In his kitchen Jeremy piled leftover barbecue chicken breasts and potato salad onto a paper plate, sprinkled it with vinegar potato chips, then poured a glass of water from the tap. He struggled to carry it all back outside without spilling food onto his yard of parched dirt and pebbles. Over his shoulder he’d thrown one of his mother’s oversize T-shirts that she used for a nightgown. He’d rummaged fast because Auden was alone out there with this girl and her knife. Not that it mattered: A threat of violence was something Auden would just drink up like he was dying of thirst.

The girl who called herself Rhonda ate the cold chicken and chips inside the fort, her legs dangling down through the trapdoor into the bunker below, as if she’d been born from there and was still attached to the lower dark somehow. The oversized T-shirt sat in her lap collecting bone scraps and finger grease, and Jeremy stayed wary of anything she might suddenly do or say. He filtered through all the stranger warnings he’d learned by rote, but none of them seemed to apply to her.

She said: „Where I come from, you know, they nothing but dealing down there. My dad he do crack, meth. Y’all got no idea out here with these trees and them birds chirping and shit. One time I seen this dude get popped right in a phone booth. He on the phone and this car roll up and all a sudden, bam! right? His ass go down, blood all on the glass. That’s why I’m up in here with y’all. Ain’t never going back there, feel?” She dropped her last bone down into the hole and balled the T-shirt in her hands and tossed it at Jeremy’s face. His eyesight went black for a second, blocking everything but the cold-poultry stench and Rhonda’s glassy laughter.

At night Jeremy sat on his living room couch catching breeze from an electric fan. The heat was giving him sores where his flab creased too much, so he ate a package of cinnamon toaster pastries to make himself feel better. While he scratched bug bite welts on his legs, the evening news came on and reported nothing about Rhonda Peach or any missing girl. He wondered if he should explore out back to see if Rhonda had been just some daydream ghost that he and Auden had dreamed up together. When the phone rang it was already in his hand.

„Is she still there?” Auden said over the line.

„I don't know.”

„Didn't you go out to see her again?”

„No, not really.”

„That's pretty rude, man. Bring her a blanket or some dinner or something.”

„My mom'll already notice her shirt is missing. What am I supposed to do?”

„I'm sleeping over tomorrow. Is that cool? Maybe I should come over now.”

„No,” Jeremy said. „My mom's coming home and she'll bitch.”

„So I'll hang out with Rhonda in the fort.”

„She's got a knife. We don't even know who she is.”

„She's just some kid like us.”

„Not like us,” Jeremy said. Even with the fan blades thrusting at him full blast he still kept sweating, his thick bangs sticking to his forehead and cheek, itching, as if the heat off Rhonda's body could reach him even from behind locked doors thirty feet away. He'd felt lost and weak like this before—like just a week ago when at the Hammersport Village Library Auden had shown him a secret Web site loaded with authentic forensics files: motorcycle accidents and aborted fetuses, a wedding portrait set alongside the bride's autopsy shots dated three days later, a hunter who'd been hit by a train and whose clean-sheared face had bunched up above his skull like a red toque, vivid in the downy snow. He kept looking, as if those downloads could uncover some kind of truth. Instead they left him raw and hollow and wondering how Auden siphoned up life from that ugliness like it was his main source of fuel. He said: „I want to go out like that. I want to just detonate in a million pieces and totally disappear.”

Mom staggered in after midnight stinking of ammonia in her nurse's uniform and carrying a Burger King bag, which she dropped in his lap while she slumped down beside him on the couch. She lit a cigarette and let her eyes swell shut after thirty seconds of Leno. Grueling twelve-hour shifts at the hospital left her too drained to talk, so Jeremy just pulled the cigarette from her mouth and snuffed it in an ashtray. He went down the hall to his bed where he chewed the cold Whopper and fries. He blasted Xbox monsters into gore and watched a mosquito suck his knee and thought of Rhonda out there exposed among the swarming insects. He tried to sleep and thought of Rhonda dozing on the rugged fort floor—or worse, back inside that bunker balled up on the damp soil. He thought of her until her fingernails clicked against his window and startled all the thinking away.

Rhonda pushed upward on the screen and it opened cockeyed. She pressed her face grotesque against that screen and whispered, „Here, here!”, groping inside to slap the wall. Jeremy pushed aside fast food trash and scrambled down onto the floor wearing only his boxers. He tried to drag his biggest pillow across his lap, but Rhonda grabbed his hand strong enough to tear ligaments. No ghost about her.

„You damn sweet,” she said. „Letting me crash here. You got a smoke?”

„I’ll steal some of my mom’s cigarettes,” he said.

„Ain’t got nothing stronger?”

„Naw, just cigarettes. And Burger King if you want some.”

It was no sweat swiping a few Dorals from the pack in Mom’s purse because she smoked and slept too hard to notice. Even if she caught him or discovered Rhonda, he doubted much would happen. Maybe back months ago when she was dating an Orleans County sheriff’s deputy named Randy Coolidge, who’d been over for a steak dinner one night, who’d flashed the Colt .45 he carried for kicks, who’d urged Jeremy not to rush his driver’s permit—but that romance had gone stale so fast that Jeremy never even had a chance to fret about it.

Rhonda pushed up the screen all the way, and Jeremy slipped her four cigarettes and a lighter. She took one deep sniff along the length of a cigarette and let her eyes drift shut in satisfaction, humming to herself. „Come up over here a sec,” she said, squirming her head under the screen. He leaned closer and she caught his chin and pulled him against her lips for a fast, flinching kiss that left a flavorless slick on his mouth.

„What was that for?” Jeremy hugged his legs against his crotch so Rhonda couldn’t see what her kiss had done, couldn’t brand him a pervert and run off as fast as she’d appeared.

„You never killed nobody before, right?” Rhonda said, smoking deep drags. „’Cause I did. I killed this white boy in a pool when I was but six years old. Believe, he was cussing me, poking me, so I drowned him good when nobody was looking. People they got thinking it was a accident. Now you the only one who know—how about that?”

„I don’t think I believe you,” Jeremy said.

„Damn,” Rhonda said, scowling at him and laughing without opening her mouth.

They took to the canal trails with Rhonda standing barefoot on the back pegs of Auden’s bike, her dark hands clasped against his naked shoulders as she ducked and screeched whenever the tree branches hung over the path, or when Auden swerved to avoid a root sprouting from the dirt. For a while she was wearing clothes that Auden had borrowed from his mother’s closet—a NIAGARA FALLS MAID OF THE MIST T-shirt and a pair of spandex shorts—but when they reached a defunct canal bridge and climbed the concrete embankment, she stripped off those clothes and stood on the bridge grates in nothing but her ragged bra and Hanes boys’ briefs that were coming unstitched along the waistband. The sun glinted silver off her back. Except for what made her female, she was all sinew like Auden. Like Auden she was scarred—one raised pink wound on a thigh and the other on her spine above that tattered waistband. Both scars were longer than a finger and neither was fully healed.

Auden and Rhonda had ventured onto the condemned bridge, well beyond the orange detour sign that had been blocking off traffic for years. They climbed the pedestrian handrail where the paint flaked like blistered skin, where a ten-foot drop would send them down into water of unknown depth and blackish pitch. They called it „scum jumping” at school because only fate knew what solid or

liquid garbage might flow across your drop zone, and that was the thrill of it. And there were legends, like the boy who'd shredded his stomach open by diving through the rib cage of a floating cow carcass.

„You coming, Jere?“ Auden said, dropping his own pants.

Rhonda straddled Auden's back and wrapped her thighs over his hips, and together they leaped like skydivers, howling through a split-second of airtime, still clinging together when they splashed below the water. Jeremy wanted to jump. He struggled to twist a hard knot in his nerves, but his feet wouldn't even step onto the bridge. Still he clapped and whistled through his pinkies when Rhonda and Auden surfaced their heads from underwater and swam to the sandstone bank.

Down at the construction site, the foundations had grown wood structures and fiberglass flesh that breathed when wind came through. Each house was a maze of door frames and staircases luring you upward to higher floors that had no floors. Roofs were already laid and shingled, but underneath was nothing but open voids waiting for sinks, tubs, window glass, electrical outlets that would soon juice these houses to life. There were trenches around the foundations, muddy inside like moats that had drained, but the boys and the runaway leaped across them and landed inside hardwood foyers. Auden found a yellow hard hat on a pile of wrapped drywall packages, and he set the hardhat on Rhonda's head to make her laugh and swear at him. In the bathroom Rhonda found a white plastic pipe the size of a baseball bat and chased Auden with it through invisible walls until he circled back around into the hallway and used Jeremy as a shield against her. Jeremy grabbed for Rhonda's swinging pipe. When they ran the floors rumbled and the unsettled sawdust misted up to make them cough. They were hysterical, roaring and choking like a gas bomb had caught them off guard, like they were holed-up convicts being raided by a SWAT team.

One house was more complete than the others, this one with upstairs flooring and some installed drywall, even electrical boxes and thick metal wires snaking up the stud beams. In the bathroom, the toilet, sink, and tub were stark white porcelain, though there was no water and no faucets to run it. Auden lifted the toilet seat and threatened to piss, even pulled his dick up over his waistband and aimed it at the bowl, but he quit his bullshit after Rhonda clasped one hand over her mouth and slumped into the bathtub laughing and pointing at him. Auden said: „I'm going to throw you in that basement, girl,“ and that was enough to make her sober. In the basement there was nothing but dark, and Rhonda had kept away from the downward staircases in every house where they'd trespassed—like hiding in that hole had ruined her to darkness forever.

„That ain't funny, needle dick. For real,“ she said, slapping away his hands when he tried to pull her out of the tub. He reached again and she pulled him down on top of her. Jeremy left them alone that way, knowing Auden would relish her in ways that he himself had balked at. Jeremy's restraint was coiled inside his gut and set to tighten whenever nerves kicked in. But some trick of blood had reckoned Auden guilty of nothing, chained to nothing, sucking up his stolen candy while Jeremy could only follow behind him gathering up the empty wrappers.

Jeremy climbed the stairs to the second floor and headed for the master bedroom where a balcony overlooked wide acres of cleared land. No railing was

built yet, so he sat on the edge and wondered if he'd break his legs from a one-story jump. Maybe Auden and Rhonda would drag him back inside and set his bones, and it could be like the end of a battle where they claimed this place as theirs because they'd conquered it fair and square. They could live here while the grass grew long and the moving vans paraded down the road. They could hoard credit cards from the mailbox and charge a big-screen TV with DVDs and pizzas and a couch that folded out into a bed. They could find a way to call themselves a family, even if nobody else had ever lived like that before. Jeremy knew better than to tell Auden about these dreams. Auden only grasped at what couldn't be reached. He wasted no plans on what others judged to be true or right or safe about the world.

They were riding the gravel shoulder on Route 104 past cabbage fields and swampy forest posted against hunters, out past Auden's trailer park and almost to Jeremy's house when they heard a car horn honk from the grape orchard across the street. It was a red-and-white sheriff's cruiser idling on the edge of a blind access road, and Jeremy knew the driver had to be his mom's ex-fling, deputy Randy Coolidge, running traffic for ticket quotas.

„Keep going,” Auden said, but Jeremy was already veering onto the road.

Deputy Coolidge rolled down his window and leaned an elbow out. He was wearing his Stetson hat and shades, but Jeremy recognized his blond handlebar mustache and the pockmark scars on his cheeks. After Jeremy crossed, the deputy said: „Hey, Jeremy, how's it going?” Every few seconds a car zoomed by on the road, cueing the dashboard radar to clock its speed.

„Fine,” Jeremy said. „Just hanging out.”

The deputy lifted his sunglasses and squinted at Auden and Rhonda, who were sitting on the edge of a drainage ditch across the street. He said, „Who're those guys you're with?”

„My friends Auden and Carla.”

„Carla, huh?” the deputy said. A woman barked out numbers on the radio clipped to the epaulette on his shoulder, and Jeremy worried it was some kind of coded all-points bulletin against Rhonda, wanted in seven states for crimes that he'd just made himself accessory to with his blurted lie.

„Uh-huh,” Jeremy said.

„You guys staying out of trouble?”

„Yeah, I guess.”

„How's your mom doing?”

„She's all right. She works a lot.”

„She gets tired?” the deputy guessed, adjusting his rearview mirror that reflected nothing but grapevines and farm equipment. A Xeroxed picture of a dog was stapled to a telephone pole near the passenger side of the cruiser. Jeremy now realized it was a bulletin for a missing Chihuahua, the one Auden had goaded into getting itself lost forever in the woods.

Jeremy said, „Yeah, she gets tired.”

„Well, tell her I said hi, will you?”

„Okay,” Jeremy said.

„I been, you know, tell her I been thinking about her, and she can call me if she gets some free time. If she feels like it. She has my number.”

„Okay,” Jeremy said, but he was thinking about that dog.

Inside the fort was hot like a car left all day in the sun, hot that scalded Jeremy’s sinuses and made him gasp in the blue-tarped haze and the pot smoke billowing out of Rhonda’s mouth. She brought the pipe to her lips again as she leaned against Auden’s bare shoulder. Auden tilted his lighter upside down into the bowl and thumbed the flame back on. Jeremy had already drunk enough vodka to make his veins alert and his senses jagged. He couldn’t remember when or why Rhonda had taken off her shirt, but they were all topless, even Jeremy as he sat across from the other two with the trapdoor shut between them. Rhonda’s eyes were fixed yellow stones, warning him while the rest of her shimmered—her heavy breasts with thin stretch marks shaped like lightning, coal black areolas big as pacifiers. Seeds crackled inside the bowl as she inhaled and drooped her eggplant eyelids. The muscles in Jeremy’s limbs wilted. One of his socks was coming off, and it was live wriggling flesh that was molting off.

„My birthday’s today,” Rhonda said. „For real.”

„How old are you?” Auden said. He was rubbing his cheek against her braids.

„Naw, I mean it’s today. The first one. My birthday.”

Auden cackled and swiped his hand lazily, absently over her breast.

„You fresh, needle boy,” she said, sliding away from him. „And I got to piss.”

Jeremy didn’t know where she was headed—out into the woods or maybe inside his house for a real working bathroom—but after she left, Auden slid forward and reached for the vodka bottle that Jeremy was offering him.

„I want to ask you,” Auden said, taking a swig. He crammed his chin into his chest and held his breath while the throat sting passed. „Do you think she’s real?”

„What do you mean?”

„I mean do you believe in her? Rhonda. She came out of nowhere, nobody’s looking for her. She said she was born today but she was here yesterday. Man, where do you think she came from? Down there?” He hooked his thumb over toward the trapdoor, the darkness beneath it.

„Stuff like that don’t happen.”

„Maybe not, but come on. How long has Rhonda been here with us?”

Jeremy opened his mouth to answer but he couldn’t think of how to clock the kind of time they’d been spending, time that didn’t measure in regular hours and days.

„See, you don’t know,” Auden said. „Neither do I. And what about them houses they’re building? Did you stop and think why they’re getting done so fast but there’s never any workers there—just shit they left behind?”

„Maybe they work at night.”

„Nobody works at night, man. And why are they building places like that around here? Did you think about that? Nothing but junk houses and trailer parks. Nobody real is ever going to want to live here or send their kids to our bumfuck school. Something’s going on here and you got to pay attention, that’s all. You got to follow it. Least I do. Even them frogs grew too fast.”

„I want to follow it, I do,” Jeremy slurred. But somewhere he’d lost his way in a dream realm where trees uprooted and concrete crumbled and blood trickled from faucets and bridges whipped their suspension wires. The slashed telephone lines

were snaking and sparking on the ground and none of the emergency calls were getting through.

Jeremy woke in his own bed with a sheet balled between his legs. Outside the window, rain drizzled through long streams of fog drifting through his yard and the backwoods. His fort appeared through the haze, out beyond the muck field that his yard had become, so he hurried into a pair of sweatpants, grabbed a T-shirt off the floor, rushed down the hallway and out into the yard in his bare feet, slipping and scraping on the pebbly ground. Could mud spit between his toes.

„Hey! Hey!” he yelled into the fort. „I told you, Auden!”

He yanked at the blue tarp but lost his footing and elbowed the ground strewn with twigs and sharp-edge rocks. Blood on his fingertips, but he didn't know from where—maybe from the way he dug at the nail-riddled walls inside, finding nothing but the empty vodka bottle he'd left there overnight. The empty fort creaked and leaned when he shouldered it, and the second time it overturned, snapping nails and folding upon itself like a box cut down for bailing. There on the ground was the phantom shape of the fort etched in raw earth, crawling with worms and grubs and stunted white roots. In the center of that shape was the naked maw the boys had dug last summer. It was littered with empty candy wrappers and dirty magazines and nothing else but the scattered action figures laying open-eyed like corpses on a battlefield. Jeremy slid down into the hole and pushed at the ground with his fists until he was gasping, until he was convinced that there were no secret gateways to be found. All he unearthed was an old clawed hammer with a duct-taped handle. It was the same hammer he'd used last summer to drive those nails that had kept his hideaway upright for so long now.

„Auden!” he screamed as he rode one-handed. “Auden!”

Bare feet torn apart on the aluminum-traction bike pedals, and his head throbbing with leftover alcohol and too many adrenaline doses by the time he reached the site and coasted downhill across freshly laid blacktop. Doors and windows were pressed into their cavities with brand-name stickers still affixed, fancy doors with coats of varnish and etched-glass portholes. The few houses still without siding wore silver insulation panels, and every acre of ground had been treated with spray-on grass of a shade he'd never seen before in nature. He dumped his bike against a front yard electric box and trudged on foot across the driveway full of gravel shifting underfoot as if it meant to topple him.

„Auden!” he yelled at the second-story windows, though he didn't know why this house over the others, this house with its pastel blue siding and two-car garage like so many of the others. The front door was in place, but it was a petty defense with its routed hole where the doorknob should go. He pushed through the door and screamed up the main staircase, „Where are you?” His voice snapped from the force and now it was nothing but a rasping whisper.

Without speech he turned to other means, first in the living room where a bay window showed a neighborhood vista that curved up the blacktop toward the main road. He smashed his hammer blunt end first into that window and the glass dropped like ice sheets drifting over a waterfall. The drywall he assaulted with the

hammer claw, two-handed strokes that punctured and then tore away the paper skin and chalky white chunks. He breathed the white dust and kept swinging until the wound he'd made could be clotted with a Frisbee, then he ripped away the exposed pink fiberglass, handfuls of cottony tufts concealing nothing but solid wood paneling behind it. He punched the wood but it was just as real as the ground below his fort had been.

„Where are you?” he wheezed.

In the bathroom he lifted the ceramic slab off the toilet tank and rammed it through the window. He kicked plumbing pipes with no effect but a record of his bloody footprints. With both hands he grappled the showerhead, snapped it off the wall, tossed it in the corner. He caught sight of his image in the vanity mirror looking wild and wet and electric, and for one frantic second he finally recognized himself. The fat kid in the mirror was him, and he was just that kid's reflection caught in glass, just a shadow. He knew if he just kept smashing he'd break through, and then he could also be in that place where Auden and Rhonda had gone.

He raised the hammer to shatter himself, but the echo of a dog bark stopped him. Back in the hallway, heaving asthmatically, he inched open the basement door and looked down into the pitch-black nothing. The barking was clearer now, set to the rattle of a chain dragging over concrete. It was down there, but distant, much farther than just one story.

Outside, a cruiser siren squawked once. The swirling red-and-blues made Jeremy squint when he looked out the window of his new dream house he'd ransacked. Deputy Coolidge opened his driver door and stepped out onto the gravel. He took off his sunglasses and Stetson hat on his way up the porch steps. In the doorway he said, „Come on, Jeremy. What is this? Why's it have to be you doing this? Why don't you put down that hammer now, will you? I don't like this any more than you, so I'd rather just make it smooth without no handcuffs or nothing. You don't want me to have to use handcuffs, do you?”

But Jeremy didn't answer. Instead, he looked down into the dark and decided for himself that, yes, he did want Randy Coolidge to have to use the handcuffs.

