

Boy Next Door.

By Terri Nixon

Based on the song written by Richard Marx

"Sit down, son, and I'll tell you all there is to know. But you may not like what you hear."

The old man's melodramatic words should have made Daniel laugh out loud, but something about the grim set of the lined face killed the laughter in his throat.

Instead he reached into his inside jacket pocket and withdrew his tape recorder.

"Do you mind if I use this?"

The old man shrugged. "Go ahead, but I think maybe this tale will stick in your mind without that."

He settled himself with difficulty into his porch rocker and took out a battered tobacco pouch. Daniel searched the his's face for signs of mockery but saw only shadows in the gloomy evening light.

He switched on the machine and left it running between them on the stoop while he lit a cigarette of his own. "Okay. This is Daniel Harrison interviewing William Chambers for the Duluth Times Gazette. Date is October 12th 2000, the interview is taking place at the Chambers homestead at Knife River."

As he watched the old guy rolling his smoke with practiced dexterity but no hurry, Daniel's mind took a swerve back to the office that morning.

The body had been found almost a week ago, but only last night had it been formally identified. Funny how it still comes as a shock to find it's a relative, even when it's no-one you ever knew.

The bigger shock had come after torrential rain had washed part of the land away and the sudden shift in soil had revealed a deeper pit, containing the skeletal remains of at least four other people, all adults.

The main news had naturally been released immediately, but Daniel had been determined to cover the follow-up; the investigation and final chapters of this gruesome and therefore desirable story.

“I’m the obvious choice,” he told his editor “I can get the inside track on this, talk to people, get their sympathy.”

“Sorry, Daniel. It’s *because* you’re involved personally that I can’t let you cover this story.”

“Oh, come on, Brian!” Daniel protested, realising his mistake and back-peddling furiously. “It’s not like he was my father or anything. Just some uncle I never even met. This *has* to be my story!”

“Has to nothing, boy. I’m giving it to Steve Barnum,” Brian told him, picking up the phone and effectively dismissing Daniel from the office.

Outside in his car, Daniel thumped the steering wheel in frustration. What the hell did Brian think he was doing? He was senior reporter here, and a story this big was his by right. Just how far was that asshole Barnum going to get? All he ever did was wait for press releases from the officials, but you had to stay one jump ahead of the police in this game. The minute you used an official release it was old news. Hardly a scoop if thirty other reporters print the exact same story.

He rested his head on the steering wheel ... how was he going to be able to use his connection with this case? There had to be a way to get the story that would make his name the legend he deserved to be ... slowly, he sat up again, his brow clearing, his mouth widening into a triumphant grin.

He remembered a time several summers past, looking through old photos and his mother telling him Uncle Aaron had disappeared almost forty years ago and that she, personally, could remember some kid being locked away for murder. There could be a connection here.

He dialled his mother's number as he drove, and after the niceties of greeting, he plunged ahead with the reason he'd called. "Hey, Mom? Can you remember anything about that family from Knife River you told me about?"

The line was silent for so long Daniel almost checked to make sure he was still connected, but then she spoke, her voice wary.

"Daniel, don't get involved okay? There was always trouble around that family. Even the mother died young; strange circumstances there too, if you ask me"

"It's okay, I'm not going to mess with them," he lied smoothly. "Just background, you know. For the story,"

A heavy sigh down the line. "Well, there was a boy; I never liked him, he was about my age - he killed his own little sister. For crying out loud, Danny, what kind of a boy could *do* that?"

"Horrible," Daniel agreed. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"He went away for it, to some correctional home for boys. That's all I knew really: the grown-ups always stopped talking when one of us came near. He came home after about four or five years, but he stayed in the house, we never saw him. And of course, we moved right after poor Mrs Sharman vanished on her way home from church. We never found out if she turned up, but I've been watching the news, and I'm guessing they'll find her in that.. that *pit*." She forced the word out as if it was choking her.

“Mom, can you tell me anymore about the family?” Daniel gripped the phone between his shoulder and his ear, and scribbled furiously in his pad as he drove, one eye on the deserted road ahead.

“The Chambers family? No, just that Mrs Louise used to be a really nice lady. She worked at the bakery in town, but after little Jessie died ... well she about went to pieces. William never really took to their boy, but little Jessie was the apple of their eye. There’s an old picture somewhere, taken after the child died, I think you’ll still find it in the town library.”

“Why would their picture be in the library?” Daniel wondered.

“It’s not just them; there used to be a section dedicated to local newspapers in there. And they were front page news for quite a while, believe me.” Cora’s laugh was hollow, mirthless. Feeling a surge of the old reporter’s excitement that he’d been missing, Daniel ended the call, tossing the phone onto the passenger seat .

He took the turning that led to the small town of Caransville, the nearest town to the Chambers’ homestead. He had to find out exactly what had happened to this family; how had Jessie Chambers died - what had her brother done to her?

Parking outside the library he looked up at the old building, wondering if his break was going to come from anything he found here. Small towns loved to hang on to their past, even if it was an unsavoury one; it gave the residents something to talk about over their drinks at night, something to frighten the kids with when they got a little out of hand.

After a quick look around he got the librarian to show him the microfiche section and the filed papers from forty years ago. As he began to scan through them, looking for the first sign of discord in the Chambers home, he remembered the photograph

and, glancing upwards, he saw the upper walls were set out neatly with framed front pages of yellowing newspapers.

Daniel scraped back his chair, wincing at the sudden, loud noise in the scholarly hush, and went over to look for the one his mother had told him about. From the moment he saw it he wondered how he hadn't been drawn to it right away: it pulled at him like an insistent hand, he couldn't look away for a long while.

The photograph had been taken in 1958, soon after the death of little Jessica Chambers. The remaining family grouped together; Louise sitting in a large chair, her hands folded on her lap, William and Jake, her husband and ten year old son, dutifully at her side. It was less like a photograph than a painting by Norman Rockwell; the all-American family posing for their portrait, the background cluttered with the everyday trappings of normal life – it looked like a newspaper office to Daniel's trained eye.

But as normal as the picture appeared, it seemed wrong; not only could he sense the great gulf Jessie had left in their lives, he could imagine her there, in the picture with them. She would be sitting there, at her mother's feet, her four year old face staring with wide eyes at the camera, her fingers curled in her own hair. He could even hear the light, musical giggle as the photographer pulled a face to make her smile ...

Daniel tore his gaze away from the picture, still hearing the echoes of that laughter in his head, and when he looked back, the feeling of there being four people in the picture was gone. There were only three, grief-saddened people, each with a look so brittle it felt as if to breathe gently on them would scatter them like so much dust.

Trembling, Daniel made a mental note of the date of the newspaper and went back to his seat. He found the corresponding filed edition and began to read. After a moment he stopped, and went back ten years, starting from when it had really begun.

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*The Chambers Family.*

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When William Chambers returned from his tour of duty in the World War Two, he married his sweetheart Louise Ward and they moved into the homestead that Willie's father had built as a wedding present. Jake had been born three years later, in the March of 1948.

The winter of '47 / '48 had been cold and hard; Louise had been unable to help Willie with the livestock as her pregnancy progressed, and when the freezing months had given way to flash floods, the shock of the river bursting its banks had sent her into labour. Her screams echoed off the wooden walls as she and Willie struggled to reach higher ground, to avoid the swirling devastation as the sudden thaw destroyed their home around them.

Louise's labour was long and difficult, and when Jake was finally born Willie was almost as exhausted as his wife. But worry for their livelihood stole the ability to share her deep joy as she stared down at their son, so perfect in his innocence.

As the boy grew it was clear he was not going to be the shining son Willie and Louise both longed for. He was sullen, withdrawn, and seemed to nurture an inexplicable bitterness, the origin of which his parents couldn't understand. The doctors later said it was undoubtedly attributable to the traumatic manner of his birth: small comfort to Louise, and Willie had long since washed his hands of the boy.

When Jake was six, his sister was born. She was as sunny as Jake was withdrawn, and as content as he was bitter. They named her Jessie, and she lit up their lives from the minute she was born. This time the labour took place in the local hospital and progressed with no complications; Louise brought her baby daughter home in Willie's truck just five hours after the birth, and Clara Chambers, Willie's mother, pronounced her the most beautiful child she had ever seen.

"You're blessed, darling," she told a radiant Louise, kissing her own delighted son as he stood by his wife.

Unexpectedly, as Jessie grew, she had time only for Jake; his every move was followed slavishly by her wide blue eyes and if he spoke to her, her chubby little face would split into a grin that lit the whole room.

As she began to toddle, she would follow him everywhere. "Cawwy?" she begged in her lilting voice, her round little fists locked onto his bare knees. He would grunt and lift her up, thawing only slightly as he felt her warm, rounded arms come around his neck and hold him tightly.

It annoyed him how she followed him everywhere though; even when he was doing his chores, there would be Jessie, sitting watching him solemnly through the curtain of her shining dark hair, her dress wound around her fingers and covered in the dust of the ground on which she invariably sat.

"Go indoors, Jessie!" It was a familiar phrase, uttered either with exasperation or resignation, but she would shake her head, her eyes fixed on his with such adoration he couldn't bring himself to tell her off.

The truth was, it seemed Jessie was the only one who really loved him; his mother was always so busy, either with her daughter or her job at the town bakery, and if Jake

went looking for his father, Willie would bark over his shoulder to leave him alone, he was working.

“Go and find something to do, boy.”

And so Jake did.

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*Jake: The Dark Years.*

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I found the place near the river after one time Daddy told me to go away. I heard the coldness in his voice and I ran, just ran away as far as I could go before I got tired. I ended up in the little woods near the river, and I saw the place, tucked away like an old secret. Nobody had been there for years, it was closed up and dark, and completely ignored by everybody as if it didn't exist. In a funny kind of way that made it just like me, and so I told no-one about it. It was mine. No, more than that: it was *me* ...

To begin with I thought I might be in trouble if I went inside, but that was when I still hoped that somehow, somebody cared enough to give me a hiding. It might seem weird to anyone else, but I would have been happy enough if someone had really told me off, sent me to bed without supper, *anything* to show me that I was a real person to them.

So I used to just sit outside the hut, lost in my games: I was a pioneer, come from England, my family had been killed by Indians and I was alone here by this river, guarding my property.

I had lots of enemies to fight, and it was while I was running around the back of the hut to head them off that I found the pit. Well, I guess it was probably an old well really, but the opening was quite wide and I couldn't hear any water in there. Probably dried up long ago. I couldn't even hardly see the sides after about ten feet or so down, and I had no idea how deep it was. Dropping stones down didn't really tell me anything except that it was really deep; by the time they hit the bottom there was hardly any noise to hear.

I was just sitting there one day, throwing stones into the hole, and my mind was wandering. I remembered Daddy telling me to go and play, and my mind buzzed angrily.

Without really knowing why, I looked up and saw a squirrel looking at me from the lower branch of a nearby tree. He was nibbling away at something in the annoying way that rodents do, and his eyes were fixed on me.

"Go away," I told it crossly, feeling a spark of dark satisfaction as I realised I probably sounded a lot like my dad. I tossed a stone towards it, and it bounced off the tree. The squirrel nibbled some more, sniffing at its paws and twitching its stupid tail.

I yelled at it, trying to frighten it, but it wouldn't go, and I threw the next stone harder. To my surprise I hit it square between the eyes, and with a soft thump it fell off the branch and landed near my leg. It was dead.

I stared at it, fascinated; I had killed a living creature, it was so easy and I didn't even feel bad. I inched towards it with my foot, prodding it, expecting it to sit up and start its snuffling again, but of course it didn't.

Why didn't I feel bad? It lay on its side, its eyes wide open and fixed on the foot of the tree it had climbed so happily just a short time ago. Gingerly, I picked it up - it was heavier than it looked - and carried it over to the well, dropping it over the side and listening out for the thud when it hit the bottom. I didn't hear it.

I said it was probably a well, didn't I? But the sides weren't properly made; my Dad would have said to me that the 'Dang thing wasn't properly shored up' if I had told him about it - which there was no way I would do, not ever. Not that he would have cared anyway. He only had eyes for Jessie by that time. I was sick of hearing him tell me to run away and play, while he bounced her on his knee, laughing every time she giggled.

You know, I didn't really mind Jessie. Yeah, she was kind of annoying, but sometimes she was really nice too. She would give me sweets even before I told her to, and she was quiet whenever she came to sit with me, so she didn't really get in the way much. I guess what I'm trying to say, is that no matter what the people in town said; I never hurt my little sister, I never did, and that's God's honest truth.

When me and Jessie used to go into town with Mom and Dad, we would be left in the truck a lot, and she used to drive me crazy then. I lost count of the times I had to yell at her to shut her up, and once, Mr Rowland from the grocery store walked past the truck just as I was raising my hand to slap her, and he gave me such a look.

The next thing, everyone in town was glaring at me like I was some kind of nasty bug. He must have told as many of them as would listen, how I was a vicious bully, and real mean to my sister, but they didn't know how she could be sometimes.

But I swear on my own worthless life. I never killed her ...

She was following me one day when I was headed out to the hut, clinging onto my shirt, and I didn't want her to come. So I ran off and left her. We were already in the woods, and I could hear her crying, but I kept running. But I'd heard someone talking to her in a quiet voice, and when she stopped crying I figured Dad had come after her to take her back, so I kept going until I reached my pioneer's hut, and forgot all about it.

That time in the woods was the last time that I ever saw Jessie. They wouldn't let me look at her in her little white coffin, and all I remember from that time onwards is how my Mom and Dad somehow looked like the same person: moving in the same slow, shocked way, white-faced and silent. Nobody had told me how she died, all I knew was that they had found her body in the woods around teatime that afternoon.

They made us pose for a picture for the newspaper, and I just felt cold inside as we stood next to Mom in her chair. None of us was supposed to smile anyway, which was just as well, but when I saw how calm my parents looked I just wanted to scream at them; the pretence was leaking right out of me as I stood there, and I tried hard to stand still while the photographer got his shot right.

From the corner of my eye I saw a group of people in the side office, and since it was obvious they were talking about us, I strained to hear what they were saying.

"..Think a boy his age could do that?"

"Oh, I'm sure they won't charge him ..."

"His parents seem to think he may have ..."

"He's always been jealous of her, Keith Rowland saw him ..."

I looked straight ahead of me, my head pounding so hard I thought it would burst. My heart was going like a jack-hammer and I felt as if all the heat had drained out of my skin, leaving me as pale and cold as they said poor little Jessie had been.

The photograph was done at last, and I stared at the little group of people in the little office, all of whom stared right back at me, their expressions a strange mixture of fear and excitement. I understood that look: they *wanted* me to have done it, they actually wanted to be told I had murdered my sister and left her alone in the woods: it would prove them right; even before Jessie was born they had felt something was missing in me, and now they would be proved right.

They did charge me in the end. It all happened one morning in late fall; the police had been to the house and out to the woods a lot, searching for stuff – evidence, I guess. And they'd found it:

They'd found my footprints near to where Jessie had been found – of course they had; I'd been running away from her..

They'd found a thread off my tattered shirt in her hand – of course they had; I'd had to prise her tough little fingers off me so I could run.

They'd found enough evidence to take me into the juvenile court and have me charged with manslaughter – of course they had; there was no-one else to blame.

The story went that we'd been fighting in the woods and I'd pushed her away, panicking when she fell and hit her head, and that she'd died where she lay on the ground. She might have been saved, they said, if only I'd had the courage to tell someone ... some of them told me it wasn't my fault, that it was nothing more than a tragic accident, but their eyes told me a different story; at last I'd taken that one step too far and now I would pay the price.

In the courtroom I stood, numb with horror and confusion, as the judge banged his hammer and said I would be sent away for a long time. He just looked at me like I was nothing, and then leaned down to mutter something to the clerk.

Something about that quiet murmur sent a shock through me and my legs went to jelly. I stared at the judge, recognition flaring like a beacon as I remembered the low voice that had spoken to Jessie after I'd run away.

I heard the words burst from my lips before I could stop them. "*It was him!*" I pointed at the judge. "He was in the woods that day, he was talking to Jessie, I heard him!"

The judge whipped his head around to stare at me, and if I'd been in any doubt before it was wiped out by the sudden, startled panic in his face. Almost immediately his expression smoothed out, and he gestured to the deputies to take me down.

But I'd seen it; the truth written all across his face as clearly as the sun rose in the morning.

The more I shouted, the tighter they gripped my arms as I was dragged from the courtroom. The last face I saw, as I fought to look back over my shoulder wasn't my mother or my father; it was Judge Brenner, his expression as still and cold as the quarry pool out at Brecon Lake.

I was sent to Grand Rapids Correctional that very same day – wasn't in Grand Rapids, just named for it – and his face haunted me the whole time. I was given a number; my name wasn't needed here. I was now 'Case # 1239.' My parents never visited me, not once, and eventually I gave up looking out for them: turned out I had better things to worry about.

The first of the attacks happened when I'd been in the home for just a week. I was in the garden, weeding out the ground ready for the freezing winter, and two of the older boys came after me with their garden forks and stuff. I didn't stop to see what else they were carrying; I ran like hell for the house, but they caught me before I got there.

I got the beating of my life that day, and I learned to steer clear of those particular boys quickly after that.

Sometimes I wasn't quick enough though, and I spent many days lying in my bed, biting my lip against the whimpers that would show everyone was a coward I was.

One day I got my revenge good though

I was in the laundry room one Sunday afternoon, filling up the machines with filthy bedding, when Sean Mulcahey – also known as Case #1124 – came in. He was one of the ones who'd come after me that first day, and many times since, and as I saw him sauntering across the room I felt something weird happen to me; my chest went all light; full of bubbles it felt like, and I could hardly see.

I remembered his scream of triumph as he wrestled me to the ground on that day in the garden, and I seemed to hear it again, but then I realised it was coming from me, and that I was standing over him. He was lying on the floor but I didn't know why. I was holding an empty carton in my hand, and when I looked down at Sean I saw he was clawing at his eyes and trying to scream himself, but he couldn't.

All that came out of him was a breathy little whisper, and I stepped backwards, looking properly at the carton. Bleach. I had somehow thrown bleach all over him, and I had no memory of doing it.

Panic stricken, I ran into the kitchen, and from there out of the back door and into the garden. I kept running until I reached the perimeter fence, where I huddled down against it, curled up tightly with my arms over my head until they found me.

After that I was kept in a separate room, watched all the time, and they even gave me injections when they thought I was going to flip out again. I was careful though, and I even felt stronger because of it all. I had enough power here to make them

notice me; more power than I'd ever been able to remember in my real life, before it had all turned dark.

It took them about two months before they'd let me mix with the other boys again, and I was careful this time. Oh yes, very careful. I watched, and I waited, never realising then how much this practice would help me later. But I got my chance one cold, wet afternoon, when most of the boys were in recreation, and I was allowed to leave the room to use the bathroom.

Darren MacEvoy, my chief tormentor and better known as Case # 916, was working off a punishment in the kitchen. I slipped quietly in, waiting until the chef was emptying his trash can into the dumpster out back, and emptied the contents of a small plastic envelope into the stew that was bubbling on the stove.

I'd found the mushrooms months ago, and picked them, keeping them dried out but not really sure why until this afternoon. MacEvoy was on his knees in the corner, scrubbing the tiles, and I was out of the kitchen again before the chef returned.

That evening I toyed with my stew, watching with a hot, burning ball of excitement in my belly as the boys began to exhibit the signs I was watching for. Some of the boys went a little crazy, but most of them just got giggling and seeing things differently from the way they really were.

I guess it must have depended on the amount they'd eaten. That was okay; I didn't really have anything against most of the kids in the home. Either way, the staff were real busy for the whole rest of the evening until the effects wore off. Of course, I had to pretend to be affected too, which was kind of neat. That was a reward in itself, but the fact that MacEvoy got the blame once they checked out the kitchen roster, was the coolest thing to come out of it.

Darren was put into solitary confinement for a month because of that, which doesn't sound too bad, but solitary in the Grand Rapids home was nothing any welfare officials would have known about; it was a tiny little room with barely enough space to stand, and certainly not enough to move in. It was more like a coffin really; you could lie down, but whichever way you lay, the walls were no further than two feet away, and the ceiling seemed to press down on you although it never really moved.

This was a secret, this place, and if anyone who got out ever told, I never heard of it. To this day I don't know why; I guess no-one would believe it.

Darren was claustrophobic. He came out with his mind all but destroyed by the time he'd spent alone in that windowless cubicle, and when he looked at you, all you could see was a blank gaze with no character in it at all. Someone said his screams could be heard all over the home, but I never paid any attention; you got used to screams at GRC.

However, during the months and years that followed, I paid for the incident; someone got to find out I'd probably had something to do with it; maybe they'd seen me picking the 'shrooms or something, and they figured I was trouble. The electric shock treatment was the worst; they would take me into a room that looked like a regular doctor's room, and they'd wire me up and give me these shocks. I think they were supposed to make me calm or something, but all they did was make me wet myself. Other kids got that treatment too, and they all said the same thing about it. I felt better when I heard that.

Darren MacEvoy was a different kid now, but his friends knew what I'd done and it seemed that every day there was something: a beating, a threat – which was almost as bad – cruel and vicious things that made me half crazy with fear.

The warders turned a blind eye, a deaf ear and a cold heart to it all; I wasn't the only kid who got regular beatings after all, and hey, I'd killed an innocent child so I deserved everything I got anyhow, right? I would lie in bed at night, weeping silent tears that burned their way down my cheeks, my body aching and my mind frozen in terror of what the next day would bring. And through it all, I had Judge Brenner's face in the forefront of my mind; the man who had sent me here, the man who had, I was certain, killed my sister.

I had a score to settle.

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Jake - The judgement.

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Finally the day came when I was allowed to leave. At the age of fourteen it wasn't only my mind that had fine-tuned itself, honed by the long, dark hours with nothing to do but think; I had worked ten, twelve hours a day at Grand Rapids Correctional – tough, manual labour, and it showed; I was barely recognisable as the skinny, scared boy who had arrived here four years ago, but the image of Brenner was still as hatefully bright as ever.

Nobody met me at the railroad station – no surprise there – so I didn't go right to the homestead; I walked out to my place in the woods, to see if it was still there.

To my relief it hadn't been visited in my absence, and when I finally broke down the door and went inside, instead of being repulsed by the wet smell of decay and ruin, I breathed it in deeply; it seemed to fit my state of mind.

I went out and sat by the river, wondering what I was going to do now I was home. As I closed my eyes briefly, I saw Brenner again, his face cold and closed in the courtroom as they took me away.

I looked down and saw my hands had closed into tight, white-knuckled fists, and when I forced them open, the stinging in my palms revealed how tightly I had clenched them. Spots of blood nestled darkly in the ridges of my work-callused hands, and I closed my fingers over them again, the beginnings of the idea already blossoming in the recesses of my mind.

Squirrels. Why did I think of squirrels whenever I came to think through my plans in detail? I would fix Brenner's face in my head, summoning up the resolve I needed to carry this through, and suddenly there would be the squirrel.

Pondering this, I saw the old piece of wood I'd pulled over the makeshift well and I got my boot under and flipped it over, watching the bugs scurrying around on the damp wood, frantically looking for darkness again. I grinned, and I know if anyone had been watching me that day, they would probably have run a mile; the grin felt more like a rictus than a genuine smile.

"You're gonna have company, Nutkin," I whispered into the hole, and grinned again; I liked the feel of it on my face, like it didn't belong to me.

The next part was more difficult. I had to watch out for Brenner, study where he went, what times he was alone. It took weeks but the patience I'd taught myself in GRC paid off and I finally figured out the best time.

Once or twice I would wake up in my old room at the homestead, horrified at what I was planning, but in the morning it would make perfect sense again. Night-time distorted my thoughts, but in the cold light of day I knew I was doing the right thing.

It was time for Brenner to face his own judgement.

In Caransville I was still received with cold stares by the townsfolk; time hadn't mellowed them at all, they still thought I'd killed Jessie, but I didn't care what they thought. It was Judge Brenner who filled my head now.

I took my father's old hunting rifle from the back shed; he never went out there anymore, so he wouldn't know it was missing, and I broke into Brenner's car while he was at a town council meeting.

When he got behind the wheel, huffing and panting thanks to too many big meals and too much whiskey over the years, I laid low in the back and resisted the urge to simply blow a hole in the back of his seat.

Once we were rolling, I estimated when we were halfway out to his place on the outskirts of the town, and then sat up, pressing the barrel of the rifle into the side of his neck and told him to take the left fork out of town instead of the right.

He began to bluster and plead, and again, I fought the temptation to blow his cowardly head off right there and then.

I told him to stop when we were almost at my secret place, and we got out. I made him walk ahead of me into the woods, not much caring if anyone saw the car; right then I didn't much care if someone saw me threatening their precious judge with my father's rifle either.

It was dark, but the moon cast enough light through the trees to allow us to see our way.

When got to the hut Brenner turned to me, his hands raised to his shoulders. “Look, son, I know you think I had something to do with your sister’s death.” My mind started to seize up again, like I had no control over it. His voice was enough to do that, and I hated him for it. “Jake, listen, I—”

“*Don’t talk to me!*” I yelled. My vision was swimming, my hands trembling as I raised the gun and aimed it at him. “*I know* you did it, I heard you right before it happened.”

“I wasn’t here, I never came to these woods,” he told me, his voice weak and weepy, and it was those words that killed him. If he’d told me that; yes, he’d been in the woods and seen Jessie, but that he hadn’t killed her, I might have had pause for thought, but *I’d recognised his voice*; I might have been a kid, but I wasn’t stupid. Or deaf.

All at once the trembling in my hands ceased, and I grew calm. Now I knew for sure that I was doing the right thing; for my family, for my lost childhood, for my poor dead sister.

“The jury finds the defendant ... guilty,” I whispered, and pulled the trigger.

Afterwards, I dragged Brenner’s body to the edge of the well and pushed him feet-first into the hole.

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My mother died six months after I'd been released from Grand Rapids; April 1963. I was fifteen. She had an accident in the house which hadn't seemed serious, but a blood clot had formed and it travelled to her brain.

So there was just me and my Father left now. No great loss; Louise and me had never had much to talk about, especially since Jessie had gone. She told me she'd always believed me to be innocent, but she'd never come to Grand Rapids to tell me that, and I didn't believe her now. Her death was a shock, but I'd had shocks aplenty in my life.

So I went to her funeral, and I held Willie's arm while he wept, but since the churchyard was almost empty of mourners there didn't seem to be much point in keeping up the pretence.

Mrs Sharman was there of course, but not because she'd liked Mom, she was there because she always went to local funerals just so she could pass on the gossip to her friends.

I saw an odd expression on her face as she looked first at me through the rain, and then at my mother's coffin like she thought I'd done something to her as well. I couldn't believe it; one minute I was the invisible boy, the next I was the focus of everyone's attention for all the wrong reasons. No doubt she'd be passing on her considered opinions later today in town.

I met her look over my Mother's grave, and with the water pouring off the brim of my hat I inclined my head to her politely. "Thank you for coming," I murmured, but she turned on her heel and walked quickly away. Another person who ignored me as if it were the basic human instinct to do so, and I felt a quickening surge of anger towards her. What did she have to be so high and mighty about anyway?

It was turning into summer again. My father was becoming an old man very fast, and I was, by contrast, growing stronger and fuller day by day. The people in town still treated me like I wasn't really there, except to whisper among themselves and point at me whenever I passed a group of them. Let them; I had no quarrel with them ... except maybe Mrs Sharman. And Aaron Harrison of course.

He refused to let me buy goods at his stupid store, he urged the others in town to do the same, and one or two even went along with it. I tried to understand why, I really did ... and sometimes, in the lonely darkness of night it was all crystal clear. But only sometimes.

One night I saw him grappling with a girl at least half his age, trying to get her into his car. She knew him, and I knew her; Janine Conway - I'd tried to get her interested in me once, but she'd laughed in my face.

She was well-known for her 'friendliness' to some of the older guys in town, but that didn't mean she had to go with Harrison if she didn't want to, and she clearly didn't. Finally she tore away from him and went running up the street, but I knew she wouldn't file any complaints; that's how it was around here.

These people were so quick to point the finger of accusation at me ... I closed my eyes and in my head I was their judge; I saw their misdemeanours, I watched their sin-filled lives unfold, and the hammer in my mind rose as I passed judgement on them, but they never even heard it fall. They should have been scared of me, but I didn't know that then, and they never knew it at all..

I was judge and jury for the townsfolk now; I didn't realise I'd also become executioner until much later, when I came out of a fugue-like haze and saw myself standing over the body of Aaron Harrison out by my hut. I didn't know how I'd gotten him there, and I felt sick when I saw what I'd done, but I couldn't deny it -

there was my Father's rifle clutched tightly in my hand, and I could smell the cordite in the air.

Swallowing the revulsion that threatened my ability to carry out the next step, I levered Harrison into the hole where I'd stowed the squirrel and Judge Brenner, and then all I can remember of the remainder of that day is sitting by the hole, rocking back and forth while I cried until there was barely any breath left in me.

What had I turned into?

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*Daniel Harrison – the Homestead.*

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Daniel switched off the library microfiche machine and rubbed his eyes, his mind swimming with the information he'd taken in; five adults had disappeared over a two year time span beginning in 1962: a local judge; the lady his mother had mentioned: a Mrs Sharman; a town hooker named Janine Conway; his own Uncle Aaron and a grocer by the name of Keith Rowland. Nobody had found any of the bodies, but

Daniel was certain that they would now be accounted for since the flash flood had washed away part of Knife River.

He was about to call in the names of the missing people to his office, but as his finger poised over the quick-dial button he snapped his cell-phone shut. Better to wait until he'd got the full story; Brian would only give the information to Steve Barnum, who would then get the credit.

The next logical step would be to go out to the Chambers homestead and talk to William Chambers himself. The boy, Jake, who had been sent to the Grand Rapids Correctional for the manslaughter of his little sister, had returned home after his incarceration.

He had lived with his parents, and later just Willie after the death of his mother, but the librarian, a long time resident told Daniel that Jake hadn't been seen or heard of since around 1980 or so. Willie kept completely to himself, never coming into town, but taking his truck right out to Brookstown around forty miles away to get his supplies.

"I imagine he can't look these people in the face after what his boy did to that poor little girl," she'd added, distaste turning down the corners of her mouth.

So Willie was the only connection left, and Daniel was determined to get as much of his and Jake's stories as possible. It didn't take a genius to work out who had been responsible for those 'mysterious' disappearances.

It was almost dark when he turned his car up the lane that led to Chambers's home. He could see the shadow of a house up ahead, but there were no lights on and he cursed under his breath; all this way for the guy to be out – what kind of luck was that?

As he peered ahead, however, he saw a movement on the porch, and realised that there was someone there after all, sitting in the porch rocker, probably never even noticed how the light had gone if they'd been sitting there awhile, he reasoned.

The figure threw up his hands to cover his eyes as the car's headlights swept the porch, and Daniel killed the lights immediately; the last thing he wanted was to alienate this guy. He stepped out of the car, having pulled his tie off and deliberately made an effort to look comfortably untidy.

"Good evening, sir," he called, waiting for an invitation to climb onto the porch. The old man in the rocker nodded, his hat tipped low over his forehead. Daniel fingered the tape recorder that nestled in his inside jacket pocket. "I was wondering if I might ask a couple of questions if that's okay?"

"'Bout what?"

"Uh, the discovery up by Knife River."

There was a silence as the old man rocked, his hands clenched into fists on his knees, and Daniel took a deep breath. "Mr Chambers, sir?" he persisted. "I'd just like to ask a couple of things about your son Jake. I understand he was convicted of the murder of his sister?"

"*Manslaughter*," the old man barked. "He was sent away for manslaughter, and don't you forget that."

"Sure, sorry. Manslaughter," Daniel said. His voice held a slightly patronising tone and he saw the old man had good enough ears to detect it; the rocker stopped abruptly. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that the way it sounded, "Daniel went on hurriedly. After a pause the chair began its slow movement again and he mentally kicked himself for almost losing this interview. The information he'd got from the

newspaper was good, but even a second hand account of the goings on from this man would make his story something much bigger.

“I just meant that I’ll be sure to print the real story, just as you tell it to me,” he clarified.

William Chambers studied him for a moment. “See that you do. I want this told right.”

“Okay, so you don’t mind talking to me? That’s great, sir, thank you,” Daniel smiled.

The old man nodded, his eyes shadowed in the fast-gathering darkness. “Sit down, son, and I’ll tell you all there is to know. But you may not like what you hear”

Daniel set the tape recorder going and waited while Willie rolled his cigarette. As he glanced at the old man in the rocker, the moon came out from behind a cloud, and the way the light fell on Willie’s face made him seem much younger suddenly. His eyes were alert and his hands made quick, sure movements as he lit his home-rolled smoke.

Then the illusion was gone again as the shadows rearranged themselves, and there was a silence while the old man formed the right words to begin.

“Jake didn’t kill Jessie,” he began, “Judge Brenner did.”

Daniel stared at him, wide-eyed, and Willie inhaled deeply, letting the smoke ride out on his words.

“But if you knew that...” Daniel began, but Willie fixed the reporter with a stare that silenced him at once. Again, his eyes seemed to gleam with a sharp awareness and Daniel reminded himself that Willie was only in his sixties and not the old, old man that his posture seemed to convey. “I’m sorry” he muttered. “Please, go on.”

“Jessie was killed by the judge, and the judge was killed by ... by Jake.”

After the brief hesitation, the story rolled out in the darkness, and as the words washed over him Daniel was amazed by the depth of knowledge Willie showed of his son's darkest feelings.

But he understood how it would have happened: two men, alone together in this tucked away place for years, only their memories to talk about – it stood to reason the boy would have unburdened himself on his father. And how lucky for Daniel that he had.

He sat, hardly daring to move as Willie told him how Jake had left the boys' home and taken his revenge on the judge. He felt as if he were almost inside Jake's head as, horrified and filled with self-loathing, the boy found he had committed another murder, and another, until six residents of Caransville and the surrounding area were never seen again.

"Six?" Daniel asked at last, swimming back from the world in which he had almost become lost – a world where people could disappear without trace and their killer never brought to justice. "I thought it was five?" He checked the tape was still running; this story was bigger than he'd hoped for, he wanted to make sure he got all of it. Especially if Willie was now able to tell him where his son had gone.

"I said six, boy, and six it is."

"Who was the sixth?"

There was no answer, and Daniel looked at the old man closely; Chambers's hands were clenched on his knees, his head bowed. Daniel saw his shoulders were shaking, and his feet were shifting under the front of his rocker, as if he were physically trying to get a grip on his emotions.

A sickening feeling came upon Daniel as he watched the old man struggling with his feelings. The question came out as no more than a whisper. "Sir, are you telling me Jake is dead?"

Willie's head came up. "No!" the voice cracked like a whip in the darkness. "Jake is *not* dead, *Sir*, Jake is right here." The man in the rocker stood up and, reaching behind his chair he pulled out a short-barrelled hunting rifle.

Daniel scrambled back in sudden, hot fear. And he saw what he should have seen the moment he arrived: the man's hands were not loose-skinned or mottled with liver spots as he should have expected, his face was lined, but not by age; the stress and pain of this man's life had etched their story into his face as irrevocably as the passing years will.

His hat had slipped back, and Daniel saw that although much of his hair was grey, there still remained healthy patches of dark brown.

"Jake ..." His eyes were drawn to the gun and, as a terrified rabbit will remain motionless in the glare of oncoming vehicle lights, he found he was unable to move. Jake held the gun with a familiar ease, and Daniel heard himself begging in a whistling whisper, his voice as weak as his muscles had suddenly become. "Please ... I won't tell a soul, I promise. Here, you keep the tape - please."

But Jake wasn't moving. He wasn't pointing the rifle at Daniel, he merely held it loosely by his side as he spoke, his voice now weary, devoid of all anger.

"You got your story, boy," he said heavily. "Here, make sure you tell it right." He bent down and picked up the tape recorder, passing it to Daniel who reached out with trembling hands to take it.

He found his voice properly, though his tone was gentle. "Number six was Willie, wasn't it?"

Jake nodded. “I don’t know how, or why,” he said. “It was just the same as the others. It happened about twenty years ago, and since nobody ever comes out here, nobody knew. I swear I never hated him, I just *don’t know why I did it ...*”

He looked up and Daniel saw the tears coursing down the lined cheeks. He made to step forward, but Jake raised the rifle and levelled it at him. His knees weakened again, and he reminded himself he was safe; Jake wanted the story told, but it didn’t calm the fear that tightened his chest.

He reached out for the edge of the porch to steady himself. “It’s okay, Jake –”

“Go now, boy,” Jake told him roughly. “Tell my story.”

“But they’ll come for you, what are you going to do – leave this place?”

“Maybe. Now get gone before I change my mind and decide I’ve told you too much.” Jake made a deliberate show of flicking off the safety lever on the rifle, and Daniel swallowed hard. He backed away from the porch and kept walking backwards until he bumped into his car.

Feverishly he pulled open the door and slid behind the wheel, his fingers fumbling as he managed to get the key into the ignition. Thankfully the engine fired right away and he floored the accelerator, pulling out of the driveway in a cloud of dust and heading down the trackway to the road as fast as he could manage without losing control of the car.

He glanced at the tape recorder on the seat beside him, anxious to check the recording, and figured he was at a safe enough distance now. He pulled over and stopped the car. As the engine cut, he heard something that froze his blood; A shot, echoing in a double-crack off the trees and dying away in the distance like a far-off jet plane.

Daniel sat, stunned as realisation hit, and he lowered his head onto his shaking hands where they rested on the steering wheel. His cell-phone suddenly blared in his pocket and he pressed to answer, just to stop the noise.

“Hey, Danny? It’s Brian.”

“Yeah, Brian?” Daniel’s voice was as heavy as Jake’s had been just a few minutes earlier.

“The story’s yours, kid. Steve Barnum got called away on family business. Oh, and they found a sixth body in the grave, what do you think of that, huh?”

“Well whaddya know?” Daniel said tiredly, tears pricking at the back of his eyes.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He turned to look back up at the Chambers homestead, a deep sadness creeping into his heart. “You’re alright now, 1239,” he whispered. “And don’t worry; I’ll tell it right.”

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