

Forced Perspective

Tery:

Lacey Humphries sat in her silver GTO chain-smoking and listening to the radio. The Five Stairsteps sang softly, "ooooo-ooo child..." Lacey took another drag as they assured her, "... things will be brighter..." She laughed, "Yeah sure." It was early morning and she was sitting in the parking lot of the Little League field. Soon the kids would be arriving, their clean uniforms bright in the new sun. She really didn't know why she had picked this spot. There were just so many good memories here; memories of laughter, hot dogs, cheering, Grand Slams and cries of "Safe!" Yes, that was it, safe. She needed someplace safe right now. Lacey felt under her seat for her .357. When she'd gone shopping for protection, she'd been advised to get the largest gun she could hold steady and fire accurately. Despite her pixie-ish build, she'd had no problem with the .357 - was a dead shot with it, actually. She didn't know if she'd have to use it (*and, oh yes, she would if necessary*), but she felt better having it near.

The stalking had begun in May. The lusty month of May. First the letters; crudely handwritten on small yellow legal paper. All signed, "Your Secret Admirer." She'd read them at first, slightly amused and embarrassed by the idea of having a Secret Admirer. Then they began to come more often. Soon, every day. They weren't vulgar or pornographic. Mostly they just went on about how her Secret Admirer loved her; rhapsodizing about her hair, her eyes, her voice and so on. She'd wracked her brain as to who it could be, always coming up empty. The letters came to her at work, too. She'd got to the point that she simply tossed any mail that she didn't recognize.

Then the phone calls began. At first, just hang-ups. Then some breathing. That moved on to, "I love you, Lacey," before she changed her number and filed a report with both the phone company and the Police. Of course, neither could do anything. They never could until it was too late. A week after the number was changed, the calls began again. "I love you, Lacey," was all that he ever said. It got so bad that Lacey stayed away from her small apartment as much as she could when not at work. Thank god Secret Admirer never called there. Probably because of the zoot-capri phone system at the bank... maybe afraid it could trace his calls. So last night, she'd parked in this safe spot and slept in her car.

Barry:

Pictures of Lacey plastered the walls of the small apartment that Tommy Butler called home. He had taken thousands (*benefits of a digital camera*) and the best were taped above his bed. As he lay there, toying with the curly black hair on his head with his right hand and some different black curlies with his left, he thought about how she would cleanse the defective blood inside him. Damn that Jew-Lover grandfather of his; he had married one he'd rescued from Bergen-Belsen at the end of the war and poisoned his entire blood line. The curly hair was the outward sign of his curse. The blood, though unseen, was worse.

The idea that *she* could cure him had come in a flash. He was delivering some packages to her office. Standing at the reception desk, smiling gamely at the half-breed behind the counter, he had seen Lacey walk by. She was perfect; petite and white as an Arian angel, the perfect breeder to push the mud-creature blood from his veins. He'd been fingering a chip from his *godstone* in his pocket (he was never without it) and it spoke to him; *Her! She's the one to set all things right, Ka wills it.* Most times when the stone spoke he didn't fully understand it, but that time it was clear as glass.

The stone had found him at Ground Zero, NYC. His backhoe unearthed a bank of storage lockers, and he'd hopped down to take a look. Inside one of the smashed metal cubes was an equally smashed wooden box. Inside that, wrapped in what looked like black velvet, was the *godstone*. It was as black as a moonless night... deep, glossy black. Cracked and chipped as it was, it still radiated power. Tommy had gathered up the sacred artifact in its velvet-not-velvet, and had quickly tucked it into his Lil'playmate lunch cooler.

He didn't think it odd at all when the security guards didn't search his cooler as he left that day - *God's will*. They just got this far-away look in their eyes and waved him through (*It reminded him of Star Wars; "These aren't the droids you're looking for" - he'd almost laughed*). Since then, the stone had told him many things. And they had done things together. The seemingly random killings of those raghead bitches had been their first success, but not their only one. When the stone told him to move from New York and come here, he had not hesitated. *God's will... no, Ka.*

biff:

Lacey looked at her watch and stretched. Her spine wasn't buying it. It wanted out of the car. She reached for her cigarettes and grunted when the pack of Camels crumpled. The kids would be showing up to play ball pretty soon anyway. The last thing she wanted was any

undue attention upon her.

“Mommy, why is that woman just sitting in that car?” Lacey started the car. The McCoy's were singing. They were telling Sloopy to hang on.

“Sloopy lives in a very bad part of town. Everybody else tries to put my sloopy down

Sloopy I don't care, what your daddy do. Cuz you know sloopy, girl, I'm in love with you.”

She shut off the stereo and looked at herself in the mirror. Bags sat under her eyes like ratty old sneakers. She found her sunglasses and put them on. Lacey drove out of the park and turned toward the coast.

She put her window down and inhaled. A sea breeze tickled her nostrils. The scent lifted her spirits a sliver. She loved the ocean. She really loved living in Gloucester.

Lacey knew she had to go home and shower sooner or later. She preferred later, so she took the scenic route along the coast to her house. As she was driving along, she spotted Todash's Five & Dime Variety Store. Lacey rarely stopped here for anything. She needed more cigarettes, however.

A gray sea gull threatened to take off from an overstuffed trash barrel as she pulled over. She parked and started to get out when she remembered the gun. Later, she would think back upon this moment of decision. It took all of about six seconds for Lacey to retrieve the .357, un-tuck her shirt and stuff the gun in her waist band. After fluffing out her tee shirt she was ready.

Lacey tried to walk with a purpose into the store. The heat inside the store was like pressing a bed sheet right out of the drier against your skin. This in turn made her thirstier. She smacked her lips, grimaced at the taste and spotted the refrigerator set back in the rear wall of the store. Survival almost instantly took over and four minutes later Lacey was paying for a 24oz. bottle of Poland Springs, three packs of Camels, six apples, a pack of gum and a box of Cheez-its.

“Get your own box,” she hissed without realizing it. The woman at the register pushed her glasses up her nose with a sausage of a finger and waved her on. Lacey had stopped using her credit card a while ago. She paid with cash.

As she walked to the entrance a blue Honda pulled in, yanking a

rope of dust behind it. Lacey could see a blonde man behind the wheel.

bluecamarochick:

The blonde man in the blue Honda pulled up a few cars behind Lacey's GTO. He sat there watching her through a large pair of aviator sunglasses. Trying not to look too conspicuous, he grabbed his copy of The New York Times and pulled it open. He saw her as she stumbled against the door of the convenience shop while her big brown eyes searched the streets for signs of chaos... signs of HIM. But there was no way she could know he was there watching her, of course not. She didn't have any idea, too stupid and oblivious to know, haha! He'd spent the night watching her sleeping in her GTO in the park down the street from the windows of his Hertz rental car, a blue Honda Civic. Around 3 AM he'd even been so bold as to get out of the car and look through in at her through the windows as she slept. "Sleep, pretty, sleep," he thought to himself. While he was watching her, flashbacks of the time he had first spotted the bitch kept pouring through his mind, racing thoughts of her image being burned through his retinas and into his brain. He watched her get into her car now, her eyes still darting through the streets. He licked his lips dangerously, like the Big Bad Wolf eyeing Little Red Riding Hood, and adjusted the bill of the New York Knicks cap he was wearing so that it concealed more of his face. After Lacey started up her car and put her right blinker on to signal getting in to traffic, he fired up the engine to the Civic. And as he did so, the stones in the Lil' Playmate cooler on the passenger seat floor beside him began to rattle...

Carrie Anne:

Lacey felt flustered and giddy when she caught a glimpse of the handsome blonde. But only for a second or two. Giddiness gave way to nausea when she pulled away and saw his Honda, following her at a distance.

She fixed her eyes on the review mirror and swallowed hard. Her cigarette was clamped between her teeth like a pacifier, while her free hand rested on the gun, still tucked away under her shirt. "Christ," she muttered, swerving to avoid a cardboard box in the road and almost swiping a street sign. When she looked up, the Honda was gone and she had a fleeting urge to turn around and pick up the box. The urge won out and Lacey carefully turned the wheel, unaware that the blonde had taken a shortcut. Had she turned her attention back to the road and kept driving, she would have been on his tail in moments.

ckrone121:

The rattling grew in intensity. The message was loud and clear. It told him she had almost wrecked the car. "Stupid bitch! How could she be so stupid!?" If anything happened to her, all chances of cleansing his bloodline would be lost. He wished Ka would give the order soon. He wanted to take her so badly. He would spill his seed into her, impregnating that wonderful white blood-line. Then, she'd be his...forever. He'd thought those other raghead bitches were the ones, but he had been wrong. They'd deserved to die. Those women were examples of what happened when he didn't wait for orders from Ka. But not this time. This time he would be patient. This time he would do it right.

Tommy's excitement grew at the thought of his defective blood finally being cleansed. It did not matter that Lacy continued to try to run and hide. He would always find her. The power of the stones were greater than she could ever imagine. Maybe tonight Ka would allow him to take her. Smiling maliciously, he continued to drive, knowing Ka would keep Lacy within his sights. The stones rattled some more, and though he heard them speaking, he could not make out what was being said.....

Colleen:

As Tommy contemplated his next move, Lacey maneuvered the GTO to the side of the road near the cardboard box. Apprehension nagged in her brain, yet she was strangely compelled to open the mysterious package. Crushing her cigarette on the gravel with a weary, worn out Ked, she waited for a dingy U-Haul truck to pass before moving around her car to the box. Lacey knelt before it, wincing at the gravel that dug into her knees. The accordion-dented corners of the box hinted at the abuse it took laying at the side of the busy road, but it was otherwise intact. With slightly trembling hands, Lacey slid one finger under the tape that kept the box's secret safe.

"DON'T!" Lacey's head jerked towards the direction of the voice, the box momentarily forgotten. From the sparse wooded copse, a scrawny, pale boy inched towards her, his face a mask of confusion and fear. His dirty hands clutched a soccer ball and the unkept grass at the side of the road brushed his mud-stained knee pads. "I-I-I...don't know why... just don't." His plaintive face, red from exertion, searched Lacey's - as if he wanted her to tell him why he was there.

Dana Jean:

Without another word, his eyes rolled up and disappeared behind his pale almost translucent lids. His legs wobbled out from under him and

he looked like a soft-serve snowman oozing into the dry earth. The soccer ball slipped off his fingertips, bouncing and rolling out onto the macadam where it came to rest right on the faded white center line as if placed there on purpose for some interesting road game. The box forgotten, Lacey stood and hurried to the tall patch of dried grass where she had last seen the boy.

He lay in a funny, twisted sort of way that reminded her of a road kill cat she'd come across once when she was about nine. She had been walking home from piano lessons and her focus was on the clouds that were big and moving in a long, deliberate line. They reminded her of the elephants she'd seen at the Ringling Brothers Circus that spring. Each animal stayed in formation by holding onto the tail of the one in front of them with their trunks, and Lacey dreamed of being the girl with the feather headpiece riding the lead elephant. If her attention had been on where she was walking, she would have never slipped on pretzeled cat carcass. Man, she wished the kid's tongue was in his mouth where it should be instead of hanging out like that, covered with dirt and grass.

She could hear his small puffy breaths; and his porcelain skin was shiny with sweat. She took a look around to make sure they were alone and then she put her foot on his belly and shook it. "Hey kid," she said.

Scanning the ground, she spotted an old bottle of Coors Lite that still had some golden goodness in it. At least she hoped it was just beer and backwash and not something else that empty bottles were used for and then thrown out a moving car window.

She poured the contents of the bottle onto his cheek and it did what beer and every other liquid would do: it ran to the lower lying areas of his facial features. It pooled where it could; but mostly it just dripped off his nose and chin and ran down his neck and was soaked up by the collar of his Death Cab for Cutie T-shirt.

The boy's fingers twitched just enough to encourage Lacey and she bent down and said, "Kid. Wake up for me, okay? Come on. Wake up and I'll get you some Skittles. The sour kind."

Dancin' T:

Lacey cradled the boy in her arms and negotiated his limp body into the back seat. As she came around to her side she again noticed the cardboard-box on the shoulder. "Kings-Land Ale," it said on the side, with a single Red Eye emblazoned above the logo. She thought for one brief moment about questioning her KA, then popped the trunk & tossed it in. Where she was going - where she felt she had to go now - it would no doubt be of some use.

She fired the engine, stomped the gas & let the clutch do it's own thing. First gear red-lined, throwing two rooster tails of gravel against the Yield sign. She skipped 2nd, jamming the shifter up into 3rd. The Bridgestones chirped a healthy hunk of macadam from the highway and wedged it through the sign, distorting the message. It would forever more command - "eld"

The GTO was pushin' 60 by the time Lacey merged the white-line... a quarter mile later the speedometer was at a comfortable 210. They'd need better than that to cross over & keep her wheels. This boy required healing... a kind not of this world. She could make up the lost miles & come out well ahead of Mr. CivicMinded. "Who's stalking Who now, Dickweed?"

She saw, or rather felt, the Thinny beyond the next rise, set in a narrow crevice against a wall of sandstone. Lacey down shifted and cranked the wheels into the field. She watched the MPH rise beyond what she figured had to be 350 while aiming the nose straight at the shimmering rock-face. "Ya gotta come with me this time Baby, I might need some power." She shoved The Doors into the tape deck and joined Jim Morrison who was belting out, "Break on through, Break on through to the other"

The GTO's bumper barely kissed the rock-face. Two sparks of chrome and a grain of sand...

And they Flipped!

15 miles down the highway, the Godstone against Tommy's chest began to thrum, then burn...

"THAT BITCH!!! he screamed, "She's goin' Todash on me!"

Desiree:

Tommy knew he couldn't follow her; the Godstone told him so. He reached up to the leather strap around his neck and began rocking back and forth as he drove. Tommy rubbed his fingers over the sliver of Godstone embedded in the strap. The sensation of the cool stone and the rough leather soothed him. He slowed the Honda down to 65; there was no reason to risk getting pulled over now. Although, Tommy thought, maybe it would be worth it just to see the cop's face when he got a look at the 'cargo' in the trunk. He chuckled at the thought. How many was that now? After awhile he just lost track.

Tommy tried to remember when it all started. He thought he must have been 11 or 12 the first time. She was a substitute teacher at the Hebrew school his parents made him attend. She was from the "Old Country" and spoke with an accent. Everyone else in the class

thought this was charming but it grated on Tommy's nerves like a piece of sandpaper. He gritted his teeth through every class.

One day, on his way home from school, he saw something that changed his life. On a shop window was a flyer. There were swastikas decorating it - that caught Tommy's eye. He went to the meeting advertised with a baseball cap over his unruly hair and became a disciple. Years later, when the Godstone came into his life, all the pieces clicked. The teacher was his first trophy.

Deforest Kelley:

Greed was its fuel, its food, the sweet nectar that sustained it. The creatures that inhabited most of the worlds were a vast ocean of greed for it to draw on, and it had grown strong in its long existence. They had called it by many names across the millennia, but its real name was the Last. But That Day had come and this world had crashed in upon it. Reprieved, the Last was engaged in a desperate gambit. This fool, one of many the Random had sent over the long years, had a particularly useful flavor of greed. The idiot believed he was bred defectively (or more defectively than the rest of his fellows), and he actually thought that the crude act of mating would cleanse the imagined taint in his blood. The drive to be "Pure" in this tool had been very useful for 5 years.

It had drawn him, seduced him, trained him, and used him. They had traveled far in their search, and the Last had been washed in the blood of their victims (sacrifices?). But none of them were the one to heal the wounds of that day and let it open the gates of Todash again. They had taken the old teacher, and nearly been caught. Then they had taken the ones draped in cloth. It had let him have his fun, before it made him pour their life essence over it. Five of them, then they had moved on when the Last had felt the approach of the authorities (who had their own flavor of greed).

He was so easy; his hate (that the Red would have found delectable) and his lust (the Pink's sustenance) were the strings that the Last used to direct him. But all the sacrifices so far had just been rehearsals. With the recovering came a heightened sense and certainty of what was needed; the blood of an Eld. And when it had sensed something close to that, the day in the money center, it had used all its power to convince the fool that this was the One. Soon... but she had flipped for now, and they had business to attend to in the trunk.

Outlaw:

Crossing over was not all that tough for Lacey anymore. Sure, there was the slight nausea, but it was better than drinking that purple shit the old man made her swallow to initiate the jumps when she was a kid. That was a million years ago though, and now she had less evasive methods to accomplish the task.

Taking the GTO was another matter. She had taken other items before, and like all the rest, they changed to accommodate the Territories. So she was both fearful and excited to see what her GTO would become.

There was a savage jerk as the tires hit the hard, uneven earth of the field and a low rumble as the sound of the engine changed. She glanced around and sawed the plush leather seats shift into a hard vinyl bench seat. Then she noticed that the steering wheel was now a hard black material, much like plastic, and the dashboard dials now appeared out of the forties.

She slammed on the brakes, and found that the simple touch was not going to do it, as there was no power to them anymore. No, no she had to stand on them to get the 5000-pound behemoth to stop. The car fishtailed on the soft grass, but Lacey managed to guide the beast to a safe standstill.

Her first priority was to make sure he passenger was okay. She shifted on the now sticky seat and looked over the high seat back. Other than the Territory duds, the boy was fine.

Like everything else that crossed through the Thinny, the boy was now dressed in clothes right out of the old west. That was the only way she was able to describe the Territories to others: The Old West. If you want to know, she would say, just watch an old Clint Eastwood Spaghetti Western.

The boy was safe for now, that was all that mattered. She turned back around and looked over the dashboard. She had seen a car like it before a long time ago – a Low Man's car, she thought. They all drove them and this one was a Buick; old and black.

One of her Territory hopping friends had once told Lacey about such a car. It had been a Buick, too. She tried to remember the story, but the only thing she could remember vividly was the fact that it centered around a State Police Barracks in Pennsylvania.

She shoved the heavy door open and climbed out of the car. The sweet smell of the sea delighted her nose. Under the heavy pounding of the surf, she could hear the faint call of, as she liked to call them,

the lobstrosities. "Did-a chick, Dum-a-chum, Dad-a-cham..." That meant only one thing: night was coming soon. She had to hurry.

cubswin_cubswin:

It may have been his name, but the man who opened the trunk after Lacey flipped over was no longer Tommy. They had consumed him and in effect had taken control of his every thought and action.

There were moments though, mere seconds, when the old Tommy would surface. This was the Tommy who existed before the madness had entered his life. The Tommy who used lie in bed under his 'Star Wars' sheets and listen to the Red Sox games on the radio until sleep finally came.

One of those moments happened just before he opened the trunk. The old Tommy swam to the surface and looked around. The old Tommy did not like what he saw.

In that instant the old Tommy knew that he had a choice. If he went ahead and opened the trunk, the course of events that would follow would no doubt ruin countless of innocent lives.

Or he could end it. Just go back into the car, get his gun, and end this madness once and for all.

That thought lasted maybe all of two seconds. Then the old Tommy was gone. This time gone for good.

opsman:

Tommy thought he would get his moment now; *Ka* would get its chance now. He turned the key and heard the great sound of the unlocking trunk. *Ka*, he thought and from that moment, that dreaded moment, he didn't go crazy. No, from that moment, everything he knew turned topsy-turvy. His skin got tighter; about to burst. Just about to. He screamed the scream that could not be stopped. A crunching sound echoed through the entire vicinity. His skin had fallen off. He was only bone, muscle, and organs...! Tommy looked at the body in the trunk and was speechless. He looked down at his muscles and blinked. Skin. The body was covered with skin again; but it was naked. This was a hallucination. He blinked again, and saw the real truth. His body had gone through a "cycle change;" where your body changes its form several times until it finds the right model. Everything about the old Tommy was gone. Now, he was a warrior in Their war. He was a skeleton... and nothing else.

Lacey was going crazy. Thoughts entered her mind after the flip, and she was confused by the rapidity of them all. Kill that guy! What! *Ka!* What? Kill Tommy! Who? Him! How? The boy, use the boy; he has the key to everything! What? Stab him. Tommy? Yes, before they attack. Who? The demons of Ka. When are they coming? Minutes... they are here to retrieve his soul; the destruction of the world has been set in motion. What? Whose soul? I will tell you everything. But first, save the boy. And kill Tommy. They're coming!! Lacey, in the territories, started crying. She was confused. "What are these goddamn voices?" she screamed, her screams echoing through the territories. They were taking her over, too. But it wasn't too late to make this thing stop. There was still time.

A loud "CAW!" brought Lacey out of her Todash trance and a huge raven took wing off the car's massive hood. She shook her head to clear it and caught a view of the boy in the Buick's rearview mirror. He was sitting up, a box of Cheez-Its (*or the Territory version - Grabbits*) in his grubby hands. He was stuffing them greedily into his equally grubby mouth. "Where are we, Lady?" "Someplace safe, kiddo." She thought back to that horrendous vision of her stalker. "At least I hope so," she muttered, putting the car into Drive. The sea smell, so sweet moments ago, was now foul in her nose. "Get your own box," briefly shot through her mind and she clamped down on a hysterical laugh/scream.

rthomasriley:

The Twinner peeked through the time fold as the two travelers approached the barn. He had seen this happen hundreds of times, always with the same results. Failure. Perhaps this time?

As before, the child came to a halt and cocked his head to the right. He gave the appearance of a curious cat. The woman continued on a few steps before she realized the boy had stopped. Immediately, she tensed and scanned the area suspiciously.

The Twinner mouthed the words as the woman spoke them.

"What's wrong? What is it?"

The boy's eyes glazed over with a sickly whiteness that caused the woman to inhale sharply.

"It's in there," the boy said, his voice devoid of emotion, as dead as his eyes. "I remember this," he suddenly blurted as his body went rigid.

Behind them, a rip appeared and Tommy came screaming through. He landed beside the boy.

“It ain’t nothing but a barn dance, sugar,” the Twinner whispered as he sighted on Tommy’s head. The cross hairs of the rifle wavered slightly as he took a breath.

Tommy ignored the boy and looked around. He turned in a tight circle and sniffed the air. He glanced up at the barn loft.

The Twinner gasped as Tommy locked eyes with him. This hadn’t happened before. This was different. Tommy smiled and tipped an imaginary hat at his Twinner. He mouthed, “Yep, this time is different. Your move, brother.”

Santiago:

This was just different enough to send a chill down the Twinner’s spine. He shrugged it off, forcing his attention back to the boy. It didn’t matter that Tommy saw him; there would be no time to save the boy. There never was. He swung the rifle back, looking through the scope to where the boy had frozen. The Twinner growled and looked from the scope to better find his target. The boy was gone! “No, this isn’t how it’s supposed to go,” he said.

Lacey took a few steps towards the barn, watching the boy disappear inside. She knew that something critical had just happened.

“Not so fast,” Tommy said as he grabbed Lacey’s left upper arm. His grip was like a vice, pinching down on muscle and bone. She slapped his face, but all that did was cause him to smile. Lacey saw a hazy look in his eyes and it scared her. How had she found him handsome before?

Inside the barn, the boy knelt at the open box, carefully unwrapping the black velvet. He heard Lacey scream and paused. Quickly, he gathered his wits again and opened the cloth to reveal the dagger. It was so beautiful, and the rose...was that the rose blinking at him through the jewel? A cracking sound signaled weight being shifted in the loft above him; he quickly stood, knowing his adversary was here. Should he run outside to save Lacey, or face the man (*not quite Tommy*) up in the loft? He paused, feeling tears roll down his cheeks as the tension worked on him. He hadn’t ever gotten this far before...

“He sacrificed you, my dear,” Tommy said as he dragged her towards the car. “He could have saved you, but the Tower beckons.”

At the word "Tower", Lacey regained her senses. She was in focus now, the panic suddenly gone. She didn't need the boy to save her. She was a gunslinger, after all. "It ain't nothing but a barn dance, sugar."

Tommy didn't even realize his crucial mistake until he heard the hammer drop on Lacey's gun, which in this world resembled an old style Colt revolver rather than the .357 she had tucked in her waistband. "Oh shit," he thought just before he saw blood splatter onto the hood of the old Buick.

SimplyPlayed:

Lacey focused her thoughts on the revolver, knowing in her heart that she'd never get a chance to fire it, but knowing that she had to try. Time seemed to slow to a lethargic crawl, as she inched her right hand down her belly to the waistband of her pants where the gun was tucked. In her world of slow motion, every detail of the scene screamed aloud in vivid contrast.

A shaft of brilliant golden sunlight slanted through the window in the barn loft, the dust-bunnies suspended in it like stars in the milky way. The sound of feet on the dirt and hay echoed in her head; like eating a bag of Dorritos in a quiet library. The man (*her stalker, she now realized*) held her in a lover's embrace, his mouth resting just above that tender hollow between her neck and her shoulder; the feel of his breath on her skin was like hot oil.

Lacey closed her hand around the butt of the revolver; it was warm and moist with sweat. She rested her thumb on the hammer, her breath coming out in shaky bursts. She tried hard to calm her nerves before she made her move. Be steady. Be still. Think fast and move faster. Stand and be True.

Lacey thumbed back the hammer, and the sound was like a lightning crack on a still night. The shot seemed a hundred times louder. Her breath caught, and her stomach dropped like a stone down a well. She felt the man holding her go rigid and breath in sharply.

All this in less than two seconds.

Before she had a chance to lower the gun completely, there was a sound like someone biting into an apple. The man grunted and released his grip on her. She brought the gun up again... it took her a moment (*an eternity*) to realize what had happened.

The man's eyes were wide and shocked. He turned in a drunken half-circle and Lacey saw the boy beyond. He stood behind the man, his eyes dark and unseeing; in his right hand was a dagger with a jewel in the hilt, the same color as the blood dripping from the blade. A few droplets of blood stood out on the boy's pale cheeks, red on

white.

When the man turned, Lacey could see a ragged tear in his shirt, right in the middle of his back. The fabric around it was turning dark.

Tommy stumbled towards the boy. The youth held the dagger in both hands and raised it high into the dying daylight.

"No! Wait!!" Lacey shouted, but it was too late. The boy darted forward and planted the dagger in the Tommy's neck, just above his clavicle. Blood sprayed out in a fan, like an ocean wave breaking on a rock, and as it washed over the boy, life suddenly came back into his eyes. He looked up at the dying man like he'd just awakened from a dream. He put his hands up in front of him and began to back away, trembling and shaking his head in negation.

Tommy was still stumbling towards the boy as Lacey finally regained her senses. She leveled the gun and drew a bead on the back of the his head. As she began to apply pressure on the trigger, the boy began to scream...

"No! Noooo!! NOOOOOOOO!!!!"

snake tattoo 21:

In the stress, tension, and heat of the moment, Lacey lost all mental stability. She managed to utter something that resembled a "what?" The boy had tears streaming down his dirty face, leaving tracks. "Daddy." he whispered in a dry and quiet voice that sounded like an old piece of sandpaper rubbing against wood. Tommy continued to stumble towards the boy, moaning in agony. Lacey didn't know what to do. Part of her urged her hand to shoot, kill, do whatever it takes. The other half however, the side that read romance novels and loved to be loved, planted her to the spot. Out of pure animal instinct, Lacey did the only thing her mind could grasp; in a blunt, quick move, she hit the back of Tommy's head with the butt of the gun, a sound that made a dull thump. That's all it took. Tommy hit the ground like a sack of stale potatoes, not dead, but unconscious. Lacey and the boy exchanged glances, both of them crying now. He, out of grief and she out of stress. "W-wha?" he began, in a tremulous voice. "It's up to you" Lacey replied, knowing what he had asked. The boy got on his knees, next to the man he called his daddy, and took the gun from Lacey's cold hands with his shaking ones. As if rehearsed for a movie, he placed the tip of it against his fathers temple Before he could pull the trigger, Lacey stopped him, "Wait!" she whispered with a gasp, "tell me...about your Daddy"

Susan Norton:

The boy slumped down, his legs curled under him. His arm fell slack onto his lap, Lacey's gun hanging limply from his hand. Lacey gently took the gun with no resistance. She poured bottled water onto the

hem of her shirt, and used it to remove a fair amount of blood, tears, dirt and Grabbit crumbs from the boy's face as he talked about his short, sad life. Without thinking, she handed him an apple she'd found on the floor of the car; by the time he'd finished talking, Lacey was sitting cross-legged next to him on the ground. The stem of the uneaten apple was long gone, and the boy's thumbnail had pierced neat, spiraling rows around the apple's surface.

Tommy stirred...and then quieted. The boy's face turned the color of milk in a shadow. Steadying her gun, Lacey walked slowly toward Tommy and crouched down upon one knee. He was curled in a fetal position with the back of his head covered by his shirt, which had ridden up in his struggle and fall. She watched his eyelids and listened to his breathing, trying to gauge any changes that would alert her to possum-playing. Aiming the gun at his temple, she whispered, "FYI Cornholio, I'm half-Jewish." Nothing. After hearing the boy's story her fury needed an outlet, and she realized she was disappointed that he wasn't awake.

The inanimate matter in Tommy's trunk moldered in the afternoon heat. We know nothing about what it had been; it doesn't matter now that it once sat in a sunny kitchen, enjoying the smells of coffee and toast, feeling a child's warm palm on its cheek. No good smells surrounded it now, and no child, however curious, would approach this thing. A thrumming inside the Lil' Playmate on the seat grew stronger, and the trunk popped open.

As Lacey knelt in the grass, waiting for Tommy to make a move, she heard the ripping sound, and turned in time to see a car pulling behind the barn.

Indyana Joana:

The car door opened and a white-haired man stepped out. He reached into the front seat of Tommy's car and took out the 'Lil Playmate lunchbox. The little box sitting beside Lacey began to shake and rattle.

The white-haired man walked over to Tommy and the boy. Without a word, he touched each of them on the forehead and pointed to the barn. Tommy, whom the mysterious stranger has magically healed with this touch, struggled to his feet. He and the boy walked silently into barn.

The man picked up the box sitting by Lacey, and the knife, on the ground, beside the huge splatter of blood. Mumbling something about Tainted blood, he pointed to the barn and nudged Lacey in that direction. Lacey could feel her gun tucked into her pants. She must wait for the right time. She knew she was out-numbered at least two

to one.

As Lacey sat gingerly on a bale of hay, the man lit three torches. Lacey could now see a small table in the middle of the barn. A few feet in front of the table a tall staff rose from the dirt floor. Several feet in front of the staff were three white lines, chalked onto the floor. Tommy and the boy stand on two of those lines. Above them, the Twinner watched warily.

As the torch light brightened the room, and Lacy's eyes adjusted, she noticed the white-haired man looked awfully familiar. Lacey turned to Tommy - the young man, "He looks like you! Are you related?"

Tommy turned to her with a smirk on his face.

The white-haired man smiled slyly, "You could say we are all related."

He turned to the boy, "What is your name, son?"

"Tommy."

Pointing to the blonde man, he ordered, "Take that stupid wig off. Your name?"

"Tommy." The wig came off to reveal dark, curly locks.

The white-haired man pronounced, "We are Tommy. We are tweeners. We are the same person from different stages in Tommy's life. I am T1, he is T2, and the boy is T3."

T1 turned to the table and opened the 'lil Playmate lunch box. Carefully, he lifted the chipped ball from it's black velvet cover, and placed it on the table. "This is Black 13."

He opened Lacey's box, the one that had started this whole mess, and removed a sphere of obsidian. "This is Black 13's twinner."

The boy, T3, picked up the knife and the gem began to glow. He gently pried the gem off the knife handle, "This is the key."

T3 placed Black 13 and its twinner together and fit the gem key between them. He turned the gem and the stones were drawn together. "The Ka is complete." The gem started to glow brightly...until it was bright as a small sun.

T1 placed the spheres in a special mount on top of the tall staff. Then he picked up the knife, turned to Lacey and whispered, "It is time."

Rehevkor:

Lacey felt bright panic sweep through her as that terrible light glinted on the knife's edge. She began to turn, thinking only of bolting out the door, when she heard a voice speak. *I do not shoot with my hand.* She who shoots with her hand has forgotten the face of her father. The panic fell from her mind, leaving a cool white calmness in its place. The voice had spoken from inside her head, and although she did not know the voice, she felt a strange kinship with its owner. "I shoot with my mind," Lacey spoke softly.

T1 hesitated, the knife dipping a bit. "What did you say?"

"Why is this happening? Who are you?" Lacey's voice was splintery with fear that she did not feel. She gazed around frantically, but not in panic. She was taking in the scene, seeing with gunslinger's eyes.

"We are many from one. We are *dios-tet*," The three Tommys spoke in unison. Lacey felt a weird sense of déjà vu. *Why should this feel familiar?*

Youngest Tommy stepped toward her, and she saw immediately that the boy she had met was gone. She felt a deep, thrumming buzz in her mind, burying her thoughts like heavy radio static. She clenched her teeth and fought to maintain her calm. The boy-thing smiled.

"The boy you knew as Tommy is gone. When you flipped, in the instant that were in the space between these worlds, I swatted the child's screaming soul into the black and took his body."

Lacey felt the cold weight of anger and dismay settle into her heart. She had brought Tommy along to protect him, and had cast him into an unspeakable nightmare instead. *And for what? This lunacy?*

The boy-thing grinned. "I am the plane that falls from the sky with no survivors. I am the bus full of nuns that hits a bridge abutment and burns. I am the tsunami that destroys nations and the hand that drops the brick. To put it plainly, I am the cosmic monkey wrench thrown into the wheel of *ka*."

Lacey was suddenly assaulted by a rapid-fire sequence of mental images. Scenes of Dachau, of Auschwitz, of torture and showers and death and mass graves. She clenched her hands into fists, digging her nails into the skin of her palms. She felt something in her mind stretching, and knew that it would snap soon.

"I am Discordia. I defy *ka* and seek to break its yoke, that the truth of chaos might scrub away the deception of order. Your life, Lacey, represents a link in the chain of the Purpose, the chain that drives the wheel of *ka*. You are special because, although you serve the Purpose, you are also tied to Discordia. Your link is rusted and brittle, but even the weakest of such links is strong. As strong as a Beam, perhaps."

The boy-thing approached the staff and caressed the orb sitting atop it. Sickly bright light pulsed from it in oily waves. *Wheels, chains, links, and Beams*, Lacey thought. *Why does all this sound so damned familiar? And how am I tied to Discordia?* She felt the answer dancing just beyond her reach.

"The orb, which you call Black Thirteen, is my Eye. I sent it forth from the todash darkness eons ago to find a weakness in the Purpose. If I could break but one chain the echoes of its destruction would shake the universe, and create the imbalance necessary for me to enter your world. The black of my being would instantly negate the white of *ka*, and all would be as it is in the space between worlds. Rule Discordia."

The boy-thing gestured toward T1 and T2. "These aspects of myself,

my Hand and my Mind, I have sent forth into your world, which the maker of the Tower has barred against my true self. Their work here has made it possible for me to create an imbalance that might soon allow me to break the wall between this world and the todash darkness. But they alone are not enough. Something of myself has been brought here, but something must be removed as well to bring the imbalance past the tipping point.”

Lacey felt tendrils of black, numbing cold from the nightmare before her edging into the cool white of her thoughts. She fought desperately, but knew that she could not hold out for much longer.

The boy-thing stepped forward and took the knife from T1. “The reunion of my Hand, Mind, and Eye in this world gives me the power necessary to break your link, Lacey. Put aside your fear, and we will stop the turning of *ka*. Then none of this will matter.”

Lacey barely heard this last bit. *Hand, Mind, Eye*. She thought of the voice, speaking in her mind of shooting, and of the gun tucked into her jeans. *There is a key here, but what is it?*

The boy-thing raised the knife, pointing it at the center of her chest.

Jade:

The point of the knife touched her chest, making a dimple in the fabric before she felt the point reach her skin. Her mind was racing through memories that felt like her own but didn't at the same time. She could hear the ocean, screams of innocents, the sound of gunfire, and bodies hitting the ground. Oh, the sound of gunfire.

“Are you ready for the truth? Are you ready to be the last spoke of the wheel for Discordia? Are you ready for the end?” The boy (*Tommy boy*) asked as he pushed the knife harder. Lacey felt the skin on her chest splitting open and her mind cleared. All sounds of her memories stopped the only sounds were of the here and now. Her gasping for air and the boys excited panting. Lacey felt a calm unlike any other, she knew what she had to do.

“There will be no end here. This is just the beginning.”

With that she did what mothers had taught their daughters to do in this situation in all the worlds that were shimmering together so close like the pages of a book set one on top of the other. She kicked him in the privates.

Tommy boy's mouth opened in a wide O, his eyes rolled up in the back of his head and he dropped to the floor of the barn, the dagger slid from his hand, hit the floor, bounced, twisted in the air and landed in front of her. Lacey dropped and rolled away from him and the dagger. The other Tommys dropped to the ground also, grabbing their privates and writhing in the scattered hay on the barn floor. She had hoped what was done to one would extend to the others, and was pleased to see it had.

The key! Get the key!

She righted herself taking a stance all gunslingers knew well, up on her right knee, her left knee tucked underneath her, heel touching her butt. The gun was in her right hand, her shooting hand. She had no memory of the gun leaving the waistband of her jeans, this move so fluid, so comfortable, so gunslinger. She didn't take time to aim, she didn't need to, her gun and heart became one, and she pulled the trigger.

The orb, Black 13 (*the eye, it's the EYE*) exploded. Her aim was true, she had not forgotten the face of her father. Shards of the orb blew across the room, one striking her above her left eyebrow leaving a furrow in its wake before becoming tangled in her hair. It pulsed against her head as she stood. Blood ran into her left eye but she didn't wipe it away, there wasn't time. The Tommys were rising, rising and meeting as one. The pieces of Black 13 were sliding across the floor towards the mass that was to become Tommy-All. Discordia. The piece of the orb that was tangled in her hair pulled away from her head, eager to be with the others (*the key, the eye, the key*). She felt her hair being pulled from her scalp, and knew there was only one way to prevent this piece from joining the rest, causing chaos forever. She reached up and pulled the piece from her hair. It was throbbing and cold, an ice chip from hell. She took a deep breath, put it in her mouth and swallowed. She felt an immediate pull towards the swirling, black, screaming mass in front of her. She fought the pull, picked up the dagger and looked into the loft. The answer was there, in the loft, in the eyes that watched her from above.

sexnrasta:

As IT watched from above, IT was surprised to see how the events have thus far unfolded. In the countless times that IT had completed IT's duties for the RANDOM, IT had liked to observe the action unfold like a fly on the wall. IT never was part of the ritual so IT was totally surprised when the SELECTION locked eyes with IT. IT was not worried of any danger to ITself; IT was straddling between the loft of the barn in this world and the empty space of Discordia that linked him to most worlds that followed the BEAM. IT could care less if the SELECTION pointed her gun at IT, nor the pieces of lead that shot out the phallic end. What IT *was* worried about was that if IT did not complete the will of the RANDOM... well let's just say that there are things worse in all worlds other than death.

The eyes of the SELECTION shifted and IT followed their gaze to rest upon the morphed body of the three Tommys, now together in in the middle form. Centered in its forehead was a blood-red eye that oozed a lighter shade of Crimson, as if it were suffering a horrible case of pink-eye. This was bad. The RANDOM only answered to ONE, the Crimson King, and the eye meant that HE was taking a personal

interest in the events that were taking place.

In IT's sudden panic - *imagine the possible implications if the ritual failed!* - IT decided IT must do something. The moment before IT stepped completely into Discordia, IT saw the SELECTION flip the hilt of the dagger to hold the point of the blade between her finger and thumb and begin to cock her arm and fire the KEY at the 3-in-1 Tommy.

Once in Discordia, IT simply reached into the darkness where IT's hand ripped through the fabric of all worlds; the fabric that many foolishly called a *Thinny*. IT's other hand gripped the dagger handle of the KEY before the SELECTION could launch it. IT smiled, revealing many rows of razor sharp teeth like those of a Great White. IT relished the surprised look of the SELECTION when she discovered she no longer had the dagger to throw and kill, forever, the Tommys.

Still smiling, IT retreated into Discordia, with the intention of simply reaching out through the fabric again and placing the KEY back into the Tommys' hand so the ritual could be completed. However, as IT heard the familiar ripping sound of the fabric healing itself, IT felt a sudden strong grip on IT's wrist. The impulsive jerk that IT made to retrieve IT's hand only dragged the SELECTION into Discordia with IT. IT's first thought was of surprise, not the surprise that it dragged the SELECTION into Discordia, but that IT could smell her perfume in Discordia.

Captain_Tripps:

As Lacey was aiming to shoot at Tommy, she felt a slight nudge on her arm. It wasn't so noticeable as to distract her from firing, however. She had the sensation of being jerked into darkness but managed to pull back into the barn.

Lacey pulled the trigger, screaming in both anger and pain as the gun discharge burned her arm. The bullet it ejected hit directly between the eyes of the hulking mass the Tommy had become. With a dumb cry, the shifting black mass collapsed to the barn floor with a sick wet thud. Lacey grimaced, then began searching for some sort of aid for her burned and blistering arm. She turned away as she searched, and didn't notice as the shapeless black mass got to its deformed feet. The Tommy-hulk reached to its forehead and dug into the hole there, pulling out a large bullet. It stared at the mashed metal dumbly for a moment, then glared over at Lacey. As the Tommy-hulk began to creep toward Lacey, it became more and more human.

By the time the Tommy-hulk had reached Lacey, its transition was complete. This new, complete Tommy was a very large man. He stood straight and tall behind Lacey, glaring down at her with dark

eyes. Much of this Tommy was dark; except for his red, glowing skin. Dark curls covered his head, he wore dark flannel and dark jeans, and one toe of his black shoe tapped the floor quietly. This Tommy grabbed Lacey around the throat, turninh her to face him. Her eyes bulged as she stared into Tommy's ebony eyes. She felt his hot breath on her face and noted the small scar on his forehead, like the souvenir of a long healed wound. He grinned, showing chipped, blackened teeth. Tommy was back. And now, he hungered for human blood and coupling; to complete the ritual. In Discordia, the Twinner smiled. Its plan was almost complete.

James S.:

Tommy quickly found what he needed to prevent the Selection from causing further delays to his purification. His stone--his godstone--was shattered, but as he dragged Lacey around the barn gathering rope, a hammer, and several stakes he could already see the trail each fragment left as the obsidian-like pieces had come together.

He looked toward the loft and grunted appreciation to the IT that had staved off his demise. Tommy could not know that IT acted selfishly, serving a different master; its actions had brought the Rule of Discordia closer than ever before. All Tommy did know was that hot blood was scorching through his veins, that his loins ached for release, that he had been patient, more patient than any time prior, and that *Ka* had now made this his opportunity for cleansing. He made final preparations.

Lacey squirmed, but it was of no use. The now engorged Tommy carried her as a rag doll. She could only watch as he dragged a heel creating a symbol in the dirt floor of the barn -- a rectangle. He paced off several yards, and again dragged his heel -- a pentagram. Tommy found the midpoint of his two crudely etched symbols, executed a right-face, counted off three paces, and drew his final symbol -- an Eye. Tommy had done well. He knew his Purpose would soon be realized for, upon completion of his dirt sketched Eye, it began to glow red in pulsing rhythm with the throb in his groin.

Knowledge stirred inside the Trifectorate. "The Unforeseen should be considered now, Tommy," the eldest-Tommy mused from his deep cranial lobe. Tommy understood.

Tommy came back to the midpoint between his first two symbols and brutally thumped Lacey onto her back. The force of impact successfully knocked the wind out of her. Lacey gasped for breath. As she did so, Tommy sat on her chest with knees pinning her arms

in the dirt. His throbbing blood raced to regions south of his belt buckle. "So close, so close," his tormented soul panted. He pounded a stake into the ground, and then tied Lacey's outstretched arm to it. He similarly finished her remaining limbs, each with a stake at least a foot away. Tommy stood, wiping his bloody forehead, and remembered the Unforeseen.

Lacey regained only some of her composure as Tommy kneeled at her side with the dagger in his hand. He slid up her t-shirt exposing her quivering belly. The obsessed being that was once Tommy placed the daggers tip alongside her belly button and pressed. Lacey groaned as both sharpened edges of the ancient blade sliced into her at the same time. Tommy listened with deaf ears as Lacey's groans rose to a scream. He pressed deeper. Nearly three inches into Lacey's soft underbelly was what it took for the final piece of the obsidian-like orb which was required to be whole for him to gain purchase of the gunslinger. The Eye glowed and watched.

Tommy withdrew the dagger. There wasn't much blood, he thought. Now that the Unforeseen could not Become, since the godstone was once again intact, the trickle of blood that did pool there would enhance his enjoyment of the cleansing. Tommy raised his hands in appeasement of the Eye. The Eye glowed brighter in approval. Tommy set the dagger into the center of the pentagram.

The time for cleansing had come. Tommy knew the cleansing could only be fully achieved with Lacey on her stomach. Tommy positioned himself between Lacey's outstretched legs, untied each one, and began to turn her over...

OzzCowboy:

The writer stares at the screen, his coke-bottle glasses bringing the words into tight focus... it is happening again... where are the voices coming from (?), discarnate but lucid, controlling his mind, his fingers, as worlds are being created from his words... worlds from words... my God, he despairs...chaos is amongst them... the end is near... his fingers jitterbug across the keyboard as a new where and when continues to grow...

The fabric of reality tore apart as the woman strode through, guns blazing. Lacey looked over her shoulder and saw...

... the Tommy-thing explodes back into the wall from the force of the woman's entry. Projectiles (*four*) fly from the black-powder Colt, each one tearing through the ropes that bind Lacey. The thing above (*known in so many worlds as The Last, The Dark Man, Tak... Atta...*

and legion more) screamed at this insolence...

... “You? Me?” Lacey stuttered at her twin.

“No time, sugar,” her Twinner replied, motioning towards the Tommy-thing. “You need to get out of here before it wakes.”

“Shoot it!” Lacey screamed.

“No, honey, that’s not how it works,” the Twinner said as she picked the blade up and handed it to Lacey. She lifted Lacey from her hands and knees and pushed her towards the closing tear with indelicate force. “See the face of your father... Go. GO!!!”

“WHAT ABOUT YOU?” Lacey screamed back as she passed through.

“You do what you have to do Sugar, and I will be fine... just remember, in Discordia what is done can only be undone once... and don’t despair... its seed,” she motioned towards the Tommy-thing that was slowly regaining consciousness, “is useless in me. You can undo it... you can... it is a result of an event in your where only... it can be undone... but only...only... ONCE!”

A sharp pain bites into the writer’s mind... is this right, he asks himself?

Lacey stumbled through the tear in reality and...

She stood at the foot of the Tower.

Her hand reached out and slowly, noiselessly, a rent appeared in the charcoal brickwork. She walked through into...

... a landing (*surrounded on all sides by bookshelves*)... a spiral staircase (*surrounded on both sides bookshelves*). Every book ever written – the thought rose in her mind like a tsunami.

She began to climb. The spines of the books reflected moving images, holographic mirages (*worlds from words*), as she moved upwards towards... well, towards (*death? hope? redemption?*)...

Minutes, hours, (*days?*) passed as she climbed in a daze, her mind blank but resolute, her gut flip-flopping in anticipation of her destination.

She alighted onto a landing that led into an oval room. By the window a man sat at an old IBM Selectric. The man was...

The writer doesn't notice the woman at first... he taps away slowly at the keyboard –“ the man sat at an old IBM Selectric...”

... typing. He looked around as he sensed the woman's presence, and he was filled with such gut-wrenching love he almost fell from the chair. He adjusted the thick-framed glasses that were perched on the end of his nose.

“You made it,” he said. “After all this... you finally made it.”

“How did they get here?” the Lacey pointed towards the black spheres on the desk. This was her only question, this was THE only question.

“They are always here,” the writer responded. “What appears in other worlds are mere replicas, shadows of their former selves so to speak,” he chuckled at his attempt at humor.

Lacey swallowed the cud of panic she had been chewing since she entered the room and raced towards the writer. She knew, now, after all this time, what she must do... what she must accomplish. She scooped the balls up in her hands and held them to her chest in desperation as she dropped the dagger on the desk as a token replacement.

“Wait,” the writer shouted. “No... this is their home! No... THAT can't be here.”

Lacey ran, her feet flying across the stone floor, the black spheres pulsing against her breasts.

She ran

she runs

she runs into

into...

into...

... a corridor in a building in her own where, another tower, a twin of a twin (*of a twin from another where*). She looks out the window at the New York skyline. She looks back towards the elevator, the digitalized number 19 flashing on the LCD panel. Below it is a date... the date flashes...she smiles...

September 12, 2001...

"Yes," she says. "Yes."

A man walks out into the lift corridor, and she beams at him, her lips stretching against her teeth. It is almost orgasmic. "Lacy," he says. "Baby, what are you doing here?"

"I've missed you," she replied, fighting back the tears.

"But hon... you saw me this morning..."

"Yes," she replies, "I saw you this morning..." (*Oh God, if only you knew*) "But can't a girl have a love attack?"

And as she embraces her husband, Lacey's own voice echoes in her head from a world away... *who says a deed done true does not reap a personal reward?*

stephenking.com