



# Blood Lake

AND OTHER  
STORIES  
BY

JIM KRUSOE



BLOOD LAKE

*and Other Stories*

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*Blood Lake  
and Other Stories*

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FOR KAITLIN AND HENRY





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## REMORSE

People, and here I guess I mean my lawyers and the parole board, have been talking a lot lately about “remorse,” but what they don’t seem to understand is, while I agree, yes, it’s too bad about my so-called crimes, and yes, I wish things had turned out differently, my feeling remorseful or not remorseful won’t change what happened even a little bit. Not only that (and I’m definitely not trying to escape blame by bringing this up), it’s clear, at least to me, that this whole affair—the so-called crime spree, the chopper crash (which, by the way, has since been shown to be the fault of shoddy maintenance), the hostages, the shootout in the frozen yogurt parlor—all that could have been avoided if only that highway patrolman, to whom I was demonstrating how if he kept his holster unsnapped anyone could walk right up and take his pistol away, had just had a better sense of humor.

But that’s only for the record.

Before all that I was a licensed pharmacist, a man given over to weighing and measuring the quantities of things, because in the stories of my trade the difference between a gram or two is the difference between life and death itself. More than once, even after I had weighed and re-weighed pills and liquids, powders and capsules, still I would be struck by a moment’s doubt, and so, as an unsuspecting patron walked out the door or was about to enter a cab, or stood on the threshold of his or her own home, there I’d be, out of breath and shouting, “Wait! Let me check that prescription one last time!” Then how surprised they’d be as I whipped out my portable scale, set it on a front porch swing, or on the roof of their taxi or on the hood of my blue Buick station wagon, and re-measured their prescription just to be sure. Although

most often there was no problem at all, still, the net result of such behavior seemed to be a deepening mistrust by the patrons of Yours Truly.

Even so, I was glad to be on the safe side, and those customers who remained afforded me a comfortable living, or at least enough to provide reasonable access to the quantities of morphine I needed to support my moderate habit.

I first began my addiction, as so many others have, one day in the second grade after being passed a marijuana cigarette through the chain-link fence of my schoolyard by a local drug pusher as I was standing around waiting for my turn at kickball. The next day he was back. "Here kid, try this," he said, and handed me a needle along with a pamphlet designed to acquaint the novice diabetic with the basics of self-injection, supplemented by a few of his own scribbled illustrations on how to find a suitable vein and tie off. I walked over to a quiet part of the playground near the life-size concrete hippopotamus a first-grader, Marty, had fallen off only the week before, fracturing his skull. I followed the instructions and injected the drug. The effect was like nothing I had ever experienced. Until that time, the closest I had come was once, when watching a popular television show called *Sesame Street*, I'd held my breath to the point of blacking out. In my last moments of consciousness, however, I was convinced I was on the television, and could see one of the show's characters, a large bird, staring straight into my eyes, saying, "Big guy, seize the day."

Fortunately, in part because the smallness of my body did not require large quantities of the drug, I was able to support my morphine addiction throughout most of my elementary school years by using the lunch money I'd been given (for some reason, my parents believed me when I told them the cost had gone up to \$14.95 a day). Later, in high school, I supplemented my income with an after-school job and by selling small amounts of "M," as I called it, at a healthy profit to my friends. By the time I was in tenth grade I knew two things:

first, that I wished to continue taking morphine for the rest of my life, and second, that I should find a way to do it legally.

The moment I decided to be a pharmacist I removed the various psychedelic posters lit with black light I had plastered all over my bedroom walls and replaced them with travel posters of Germany and Switzerland. My grades improved; my parents were thrilled. I entered the college of my choice and obtained a degree. With the generous financial aid of my parents I was able to open a small drugstore, and life rolled along for the next twenty years as if on bearings made of stainless steel.

But, as we all know, change is inevitable. For me, oddly enough, the first change occurred one afternoon while getting a haircut and watching a nature special about gorillas (my barber had a television in front of his chair and was partial, I noticed, to nature specials and to economic forecasts—a far cry from the *Field and Streams* and *True Detectives* of my youth). There, as the special progressed, even through the imperfect medium of video, I found myself, between glimpses in the mirror, looking into the eyes of one particular animal, a silver-backed male named Samson, as he ripped apart some arm-size stalks of fresh bamboo. Suddenly I experienced a wave of comradeship that I had never felt before. Samson's eyes, for lack of a better way to say it, revealed the existence of a soul without a human mask to hide behind. I was speechless and my eyes filled with tears. "Tony," I said, as he kept raising my sideburns in an effort to get them even (his only flaw as a barber), "one day I will have to go to Africa to see for myself these magnificent creatures in their native habitat."





Subsequent events, of course, have made that dream impossible, but before I knew that, I found myself spending weekends at the zoo, at the gorilla cage, watching these beautiful animals and in particular, one light brown female by the name of Kiki.

Kiki was smallish for a gorilla and had a certain *soignée* quality that the other females, four in number, seemed to lack. Her hair, though dulled by the dust and dirt of the compound, seemed somehow more vibrant than that of her companions, and her forehead, although it may have been my imagination, appeared a touch less low. She had a scar along one thigh (the result of a trapper's cruelty, I found out later) but what struck me most was not her physical characteristics but her social ones. She had a way of standing off to the side of any group—say of her fellow females—and watching them as they signaled the crowd to throw down pellets of zoo-approved treats. (The zoo sold these treats at exorbitant prices from nearby vending machines as a way to raise more money, even going so far as to hint that except for these snacks the animals might well starve.) Kiki's manner, however, was not as cold or scientific as you might expect. It almost seemed that she yearned to join her peers, but something, perhaps even her peers themselves, held her back. So she stood to the left or the right, watching as if she were weighing the relative worth of the two groups: the crowd of people throwing treats, and those receiving them.

These observations, of course, were not the product of a single afternoon, or even two or three. I had been visiting the zoo on an average of five afternoons a week for several months before one day, late in October, after the crowds had thinned considerably, when Kiki's eyes and mine locked for the first time. Incredible as it may sound, in that moment I was sure she knew I had been watching her. At the same time I understood she had been watching me as well. She lowered her eyes, and for the first time, deliberately and resignedly, walked over to where her sisters were begging for treats, and as if to mock me, joined them. I tried to catch her glance, but