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NEEDFUL THINGS

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*Ladies and gentlemen, attention, please!
Come in close where everyone can see!
I got a tale to tell, it isn't gonna cost a dime!
(And if you believe that,
we're gonna get along just fine.)*

– Steve Earle
'Snake Oil'

*I have heard of many going astray even in the
village streets, when the darkness was so thick you
could cut it with a knife, as the saying is . . .*

– Henry David Thoreau
Walden

You've Been Here Before

Sure you have. Sure. I never forget a face.

Come on over here, let me shake your hand! Tell you somethin: I recognized you by the way you walk even before I saw your face good. You couldn't have picked a better day to come back to Castle Rock. Ain't she a corker? Hunting season will be starting up soon, fools out in the woods bangin away at anything that moves and don't wear blaze orange, and then comes the snow and sleet, but all that's for later. Right now it's October, and in The Rock we let October stay just as long as she wants to.

As far as I'm concerned, it's the best time of year. Spring's nice here, but I'll take October over May every time. Western Maine's a part of the state that's mostly forgotten once the summer has run away and all those people with their cottages on the lake and up on the View have gone back to New York and Massachusetts. People here watch them come and go every year – hello, hello, hello; goodbye, goodbye, goodbye. It's good when they come, because they bring their city dollars, but it's good when they go, because they bring their city aggravations, too.

It's aggravations I mostly want to talk about – can you sit a spell with me? Over here on the steps of the bandstand will be fine. The sun's warm and from here, spang in the middle of the Town Common, we can see just about all of downtown. You want to mind the splinters, that's all. The steps need to be sanded off and then repainted. It's Hugh Priest's job, but Hugh ain't got around to it yet. He drinks, you know. It ain't much of a secret. Secrets can and are kept in Castle Rock, but you have to work mighty hard to do it, and most of us know it's been a long time since Hugh Priest and hard work were on good terms.

What was that?

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Oh! *That!* Say, boy – ain't that a piece of work? Them fliers is up all over town! I think Wanda Hemphill (her husband, Don, runs Hemphill's Market) put most of em up all by herself. Pull it off the post and hand it to me. Don't be shy – no one's got any business stickin up fliers on the Town Common bandstand in the first place.

Hot damn! Just *look* at this thing, will you? DICE AND THE DEVIL printed right up at the top. In big red letters with *smoke* comin off em, like these things was mailed special delivery from Tophet! Ha! Someone who didn't know what a sleepy little place this town is would think we're really goin to the dogs, I guess. But you know how things sometimes get blown out of proportion in a town this size. And the Reverend Willie's got a bee under his blanket for sure this time. No question about it. Churches in small towns . . . well, I guess I don't have to tell you how *that* is. They get along with each other – sort of – but they ain't never really *happy* with each other. Everything will go along peaceful for awhile, and then a squabble will break out.

Pretty big squabble this time, though, and a lot of hard feelings. The Catholics, you see, are planning something they call Casino Nite at the Knights of Columbus Hall on the other side of town. Last Thursday of the month, I understand, with the profits to help pay for repairs on the church roof. That's Our Lady of Serene Waters – you must have passed it on your way into town, if you came by way of Castle View. Pretty little church, ain't it?

Casino Nite was Father Brigham's idea, but the Daughters of Isabella are the ones who really picked up the ball and ran with it. Betsy Vigue in particular. I think she likes the idea of dollin up in her slinkiest black dress and dealin blackjack or spinnin a roulette wheel and sayin, 'Place your bets, ladies and gentlemen, please place your bets.' Aw, but they all kind of like the idea, I guess. It's only nickel-dime stuff, harmless, but it seems a wee bit wicked to em just the same.

Except it don't seem harmless to Reverend Willie, and

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it seems a lot more than a wee bit wicked to him and his congregation. He's actually the Reverend William Rose, and he ain't never liked Father Brigham much, nor does the Father have much use for him. (In fact, it was Father Brigham who started calling Reverend Rose 'Steamboat Willie,' and the Reverend Willie knows it.)

Sparks has flown between those two particular witch-doctors before, but this Casino Nite business is a little more than sparks; I guess you could call it a brushfire. When Willie heard that the Catholics meant to spend a night gamblin at the K of C Hall, he just about hit the roof with the top of his pointy little head. He paid for those DICE AND THE DEVIL fliers out of his own pocket, and Wanda Hemphill and her sewing circle buddies put em up everywhere. Since then, the only place the Catholics and the Baptists talk to each other is in the Letters column of our little weekly paper, where they rave and rant and tell each other they're goin to hell.

Looka down there, you'll see what I mean. That's Nan Roberts who just came out of the bank. She owns Nan's Luncheonette, and I guess she's just about the richest person in town now that old Pop Merrill's gone to that big flea-market in the sky. Also, she's been a Baptist since Hector was a pup. And comin the other way is big Al Gendron. He's so Catholic he makes the Pope look kosher, and his best friend is Irish Johnny Brigham. Now, watch close! See their noses go up? Ha! Ain't that a sketch? I'll bet you dollars to doughnuts that the temperature dropped twenty degrees where they passed each other by. It's like my mother used to say – people have more fun than anybody, except for horses, and they can't.

Now lookit over there. See that Sheriff's cruiser parked by the curb near the video shop? That's John LaPointe inside. He's supposed to be keepin an eye out for speeders – downtown's a go-slow zone, you know, especially when school lets out – but if you shade your eyes and look close, you'll see that what he's *really* doin is starin at a picture he took out of his wallet. I can't see it from here, but I know

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what it is just as well as I know my mother's maiden name. That's the snapshot Andy Clutterbuck took of John and Sally Ratcliffe at the Fryeburg State Fair, just about a year ago. John's got his arm around her in that picture, and she's holdin the stuffed bear he won her in the shootin gallery, and they both look so happy they could just about split. But that was then and this is now, as they say; these days Sally is engaged to Lester Pratt, the high school Phys Ed coach. He's a true-blue Baptist, just like herself. John hasn't got over the shock of losin her yet. See him fetch that sigh? He's worked himself into a pretty good case of the blues. Only a man who's still in love (or thinks he is) can fetch a sigh that deep.

Trouble and aggravation's mostly made up of ordinary things, did you ever notice that? Undramatic things. Let me give you a for-instance. Do you see the fellow just going up the courthouse steps? No, not the man in the suit; that's Dan Keeton, our Head Selectman. I mean the other one — the black guy in the work fatigues. That's Eddie Warburton, the night-shift janitor in the Municipal Building. Keep your eye on him for a few seconds, and watch what he does. There! See him pause on the top step and look upstreet? I'd bet you more dollars to more doughnuts that he's looking at the Sunoco station. The Sunoco's owned and operated by Sonny Jackett, and there's been bad blood between the two of em ever since Eddie took his car there two years ago to get the drive-train looked at.

I remember that car quite well. It was a Honda Civic, nothing special about it, except it was special to Eddie, because it was the first and only brand-new car he'd ever owned in his life. And Sonny not only did a bad job, he overcharged for it in the bargain. That's *Eddie's* side of the story. Warburton's just usin his color to see if he can beat me out of the repair-bill — that's *Sonny's* side of the story. You know how it goes, don't you?

Well, so Sonny Jackett took Eddie Warburton to small claims court, and there was some shouting first in the courtroom and then in the hall outside. Eddie said Sonny called

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him a stupid nigger and Sonny said Well, I didn't call him a nigger but the rest is true enough. In the end, neither of them was satisfied. Judge made Eddie cough up fifty bucks, which Eddie said was fifty bucks too much and Sonny said wasn't anywhere near enough. Then, the next thing you know, there was an electrical fire in Eddie's new car and the way it ended was that Eddie's Civic went off to the junkyard out on Town Road #5, and now Eddie's driving an '89 Oldsmobile which blows oil. Eddie has never quite gotten over the idea that Sonny Jackett knows a lot more about that electrical fire than he's ever told.

Boy, people have more fun than anybody, except horses, and they can't. Ain't it all just about more than you can take on a hot day?

It's just small-town life, though – call it Peyton Place or Grover's Corners or Castle Rock, it's just folks eatin pie and drinkin coffee and talkin about each other behind their hands. There's Slopey Dodd, all by his lonesome because the other kids make fun of his stutter. There's Myrtle Keeton, and if she looks a little lonely and bewildered, as if she's not really sure where she is or what's goin on, it's because her husband (fella you just saw comin up the courthouse steps behind Eddie) hasn't seemed himself for the last six months or so. See how puffy her eyes are? I think she's been cryin, or not sleepin well, or both, don't you?

And there goes Lenore Potter, lookin like she just stepped out of a bandbox. Goin to the Western Auto, no doubt, to see if her special organic fertilizer came in yet. That woman has got more kinds of flowers growin around her house than Carter has liver pills. Awful proud of em, she is. She ain't a great favorite with the ladies of this town – they think she's snooty, with her flowers and her mood-beads and her seventy-dollar Boston perms. They think she's snooty, and I'll tell you a secret, since we're just sittin here side by side on this splintery bandstand step. I think they're right.

All ordinary enough, I guess you'd say, but not all our troubles in Castle Rock are ordinary; I got to set you

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straight on that. No one has forgotten Frank Dodd, the crossing guard who went crazy here twelve years ago and killed those women, and they haven't forgotten the dog, either, the one that came down with rabies and killed Joe Camber and the old rummy down the road from him. The dog killed good old Sheriff George Bannerman, too. Alan Pangborn is doing that job these days, and he's a good man, but he won't never stack up to Big George in the eyes of the town.

Wasn't nothing ordinary about what happened to Reginald 'Pop' Merrill, either – Pop was the old miser who used to run the town junk shop. The Emporium Galorium, it was called. Stood right where that vacant lot is across the street. The place burned down awhile ago, but there are people in town who saw it (or claim they did, anyway) who'll tell you after a few beers down at The Mellow Tiger that it was a lot more than a simple fire that destroyed the Emporium Galorium and took Pop Merrill's life.

His nephew Ace says somethin spooky happened to his uncle before that fire – somethin like on *The Twilight Zone*. Of course, Ace wasn't even around when his uncle bit the dust; he was finishing a four-year stretch in Shawshank Prison for breaking and entering in the nighttime. (People always knew Ace Merrill would come to a bad end; when he was in school he was one of the worst bullies this town has ever seen, and there must have been a hundred kids who crossed to the far side of the street when they saw Ace comin toward em with the buckles and zippers on his motorcycle jacket jingling and the cleats on his engineer boots clockin along the sidewalk.) Yet people believe him, you know; maybe there really was somethin strange about what happened to Pop that day, or maybe it's just more talk in Nan's over those cups of coffee and slabs of apple pie.

It's the same here as where you grew up, most likely. People gettin het up over religion, people carryin torches, people carryin secrets, people carryin grudges . . . and even a spooky story every now and then, like what might or

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might not have happened on the day Pop died in his junk shop, to liven up the occasional dull day. Castle Rock is still a pretty nice place to live and grow, as the sign you see when you come into town says. The sun shines pretty on the lake and on the leaves of the trees, and on a clear day you can see all the way into Vermont from the top of Castle View. The summer people argue over the Sunday newspapers, and there is the occasional fight in the parking lot of The Mellow Tiger on Friday or Saturday night (sometimes both), but the summer people always go home and the fights always end. The Rock has always been one of the *good* places, and when people get scratchy, you know what we say? We say *He'll get over it or She'll get over it.*

Henry Beaufort, for instance, is sick of Hugh Priest kickin the Rock-Ola when he's drunk . . . but Henry will get over it. Wilma Jerzyck and Nettie Cobb are mad at each other . . . but Nettie will get over it (probably) and bein mad's just a way of life for Wilma. Sheriff Pangborn's still mourning his wife and younger child, who died untimely, and it was a sure-enough tragedy, but he'll get over it in time. Polly Chalmers's arthritis isn't gettin any better – in fact, it's gettin worse, a little at a time – and she may not get over it, but she'll learn to live with it. Millions have.

We bump up against each other every now and then, but mostly things go along all right. Or always have, until now. But I have to tell you a *real* secret, my friend; it's mostly why I called you over once I saw you were back in town. I think trouble – *real* trouble – is on its way. I smell it, just over the horizon, like an out-of-season storm full of lightning. The argument between the Baptists and the Catholics over Casino Nite, the kids who tease poor Slopey about his stutter, John LaPointe's torch, Sheriff Pangborn's grief . . . I think those things are going to look like pretty small potatoes next to what is coming.

See that building across Main Street? The one three doors up from the vacant lot where the Emporium Galorium used to stand? Got a green canopy in front of it? Yup, that's the

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one. The windows are all soaped over because it's not quite open yet. NEEDFUL THINGS, the sign says – now just what the dog does *that* mean? I dunno, either, but that's where the bad feeling seems to come from.

Right there.

Look up the street one more time. You see that boy, don't you? The one who's walking his bike and looks like he's havin the sweetest daydream any boy ever had? Keep your eye on him, friend. I think he's the one who's gonna get it started.

No, I told you, I dunno what . . . not exactly. But watch that kid. And stick around town for a little while, would you? Things just feel *wrong*, and if somethin happens, it might be just as well if there was a witness.

I know that kid – the one who's pushin his bike. Maybe you do, too. His name's Brian-something. His dad installs siding and doors over in Oxford or South Paris, I think.

Keep an eye on him, I tell you. Keep an eye on *everything*. You've been here before, but things are about to change.

I know it.

I *feel* it.

There's a storm on the way.

PART ONE

Grand Opening Celebration

CHAPTER ONE

1

In a small town, the opening of a new store is big news.

It wasn't as big a deal to Brian Rusk as it was to some; his mother, for instance. He had heard her discussing it (he wasn't supposed to call it gossiping, she had told him, because gossiping was a dirty habit and she didn't do it) at some length on the telephone with her best friend, Myra Evans, over the last month or so. The first workmen had arrived at the old building which had last housed Western Maine Realty and Insurance right around the time school let in again, and they had been busily at work ever since. Not that anyone had much idea what they were up to in there; their first act had been to put in a large display window, and their second had been to soap it opaque.

Two weeks ago a sign had appeared in the doorway, hung on a string over a plastic see-through suction-cup.

OPENING SOON!

the sign read.

NEEDFUL THINGS
A NEW KIND OF STORE
'You won't believe your eyes!'

'It'll be just another antique shop,' Brian's mother said to Myra. Cora Rusk had been reclining on the sofa at the time, holding the telephone with one hand and eating chocolate-covered cherries with the other while she watched *Santa Barbara* on the TV. 'Just another antique shop with