

the stinge

Me and Mike were bored out of our minds. It was the end of the summer, the hot an' sticky wearing us down. We biked along the creek, peeking over the long waving grass. We biked over to the next neighborhood to spy on what was there. An expanse of rolling hills and field grass separated our worlds. Everything seemed better over there, everything shiny and new. It seemed like things we could never have – new cars, complete families, elaborate vacations out of town, secure employment, a crowd of pretty friends – as if from a foggy dream.

We stopped and set our bikes down, then laid down in the tall grass. We watched an old sedan from the 60s rumble past – all boxy, pastel, and crisp with optimistic mid-century lines to lead us into a better, cleaner future. A loud speaker was affixed to its hood. A man inside was broadcasting a message: “Listen to your Merle Haggard people. . . Merle knows. . . Listen to your Nat Stucky, your Ferlin Husky. . . Keep them handy. . . Let them guide your way. . . Ask the Lord to guide you. . . .” Pastor Amo Wong was out singing the praises of country gospel music again. “Study nature and you are studying your divine Lord and savior.”

Mike looked over to me. “Dude could talk a dog off a meat wagon.”

“Yep,” I swallowed. “Dude could talk himself out of a sunburn.”

The good pastor cruised on by, flowing slowly, the sun gleaming off his car as if a floating dream.

“Bet that’s not even his real name,” Mike whispered. “Amo Wong? . . Sounds made-up.”

We were trying to develop aliases for ourselves, just in case. Thus names became of particular interest lately. Also we were working on an overly fancy way of speech, as to further disguise ourselves if need be, but that struggle was not going well at all.

“Amo Wong,” I whispered to myself, trying out its authenticity. “Mine’s still gonna be ‘Ray McDoug’,” I nodded.

“I’ve decided to stay with ‘McShay,’” Mike reported. “It’s been workin’ for me so far. Shamus McShay.”

“No lie, hey,” I nodded in agreement. “Good alter ego. Sometimes it’s nice to just be someone else for a spell. Lets your spirit free, your imagination run wild.”

“So you’re not hemmed in by other people’s crappy perceptions and expectations.”

“Lets you come up for a gulp of fresh air,” I reasoned.

“Allows you to take a breather from all your troubles. . . It’s healthy. And practical. To know you have that safety valve, that safety net. To have the security to be able to step into another life if you need. To be someone else when the heat comes down, or when the weirdness makes its presence felt,” Mike continued. “Another alter ego can help absorb all the useless nonsense, can help disguise you when the weirdness comes looking.”

“McShay, man,” I exhaled, “My life is a collage of weirdness,” I shook my head, “That’s all it is.”

“Yeah?”

“That’s what I’ve grown to realize. . . You can’t rely on anyone else. People fib. . . You can only rely on yourself. . . And I wonder if my fate is already sealed.”

“How so, Ray?”

But I didn’t answer. I just stared at all the new houses. We were checking out the new neighborhood – to look in on the new people who had moved in over the summer. To see if there were any others our age milling about. To see if there was anything we could use. To see into other lives, lives that were different from our existence. But we uncovered none of that. It was weird. Everything was quiet. The place was empty with an eerie calm. Where had all the people gone?

I marveled at the newness of it all, as if these were brand new sparkling people without a care in the world. It was as if they never had to worry about keeping their jobs, paying the rent, paying off the bills, paying for groceries. It was as if they never had to worry about anything. I imagined what they were like. They must’ve been the lightest people in the world, just floating about the day with ease, without the burdens that weighed regular people down. I bet these people were crisp and colorful, not yet wearing drab work clothes, not yet hunched over, not yet yelling at everything, not yet always hungover from being out too late bowling, not yet faded and worn down by it all, not yet yellowing with stains.

The sun was setting. We sank further into the ground, the moist soil cooling us, hiding our bodies in the weeds at the bank of the creek. I rolled over, to lie on my back. I watched the stars come out to twinkle and glow in the light blue sky.

Then, when it was finally dark, we crept out and hopped from shadow to shadow, our own personal invasion into the next neighborhood, to creep about, check things over, to see if there were any goodies to borrow.

We crept up to the first house. Sneaking through the yard was like sneaking into another world, one that was brand new, filled with promise, with possibilities, as if

breaking away from expectations cast down from others, as if escaping into a new life, even for just a little while.

I recognized this house. It was one between the house of a disgraced former city councilman and a disgraced former mail carrier. You could feel the shame lingering in the air. You could feel the lies tucked away in unseen shadows. The area had that sense of loitering shame about it, that loss of identity, that loss of dignity, that hint of disgrace. You could taste it, smell it, that faint stench of shame stirring, as if an affliction you could be infected with if you didn't take the appropriate precautions.

Mike pulled out his pick and inserted it into the garage keyhole, poked it around and fiddled it about. We got into the garage in a second, slipped inside, circled the flashlight low in the darkness. Mostly just the standard garage fare awaited – lawnmower, wheelbarrow, fishing gear, rakes, bikes, and such. But then we hit lucky, and right on the first garage – a small motorbike.

“Potentially a sweet ride,” Mike looked the small motorcycle over.

“I feel so,” I nodded in affirmation, “I mean, real real deep deep down inside myself,” I smiled.

“So you concur?”

“I do so, sir. And with verve.”

We looked around a moment for any more trinkets to pirate out of there, then proceeded to wheel the motorbike out the door and down into the weeds for hiding.

Several of the next garages were also locked, but didn't really contain anything of use or notice other than a stack of old car magazines. Nothing that didn't exist in our own world anyway.

But then we hit on one with an elaborate workbench. We crept inside and crouched, moving the flashlight's beam around low in the room. Funny thing was, the dang garage didn't have any windows. And the whole thing was finished off inside, the walls covered in shiny white tile, like an operating room of a hospital. There was a strange examination table in the middle of the room, below a set of hanging stainless steel operating lights. For some reason the table had leather belts and straps, as if to hold down a patient.

We crouched low by the door and moved our flashlights around ever so slowly to check things over, make sure there were no guard dogs or obstacles, examining the crisp cleanness of the room. Most garages are stuffed with old bikes, lawn chairs, life preservers, and other bulky or pokey clutter. But this one was empty, man. A real void. There was a strange trapdoor in the floor. And a large drain. There was a hose on the floor with an unusual nozzle. Then we came to the workbench. Or what at first we

thought was a workbench. We stopped and studied it. There were beakers, large, elaborate test tubes connected by transparent tubing, and test tubes in racks half full of strange liquids, and wires and coils and plastic tubes and large, elaborate microscopes and things like that. On the floor under the workbench were cases and containers with strange writing on them and symbols I'd never seen before. On the side on the floor next to the workbench were two tall computers with a band of small amber and yellow lights. The computers were the size of hot water heaters.

Mike and I just looked at each other.

Mike grew a concerned expression. "This doesn't feel right," he gulped.

I looked to the door with an "I know" expression, my shoulders slumping. My extremities went numb, as if someone flicked off a little switch inside me. An uncomfortable ball of heat grew to warm my gut. My neck went cold and tingly.

I shuffled to the door, crouching low as if not to be seen. But there were no windows in the garage, so what did it matter?

Mike turned to do the same, and when he rose, his elbow swung around and clipped one of the small flasks on a shelf. The flask was tucked inside a holder, as the shelf had large holes in the bottom to hold large beakers. This flask had a coil of tube extending from the bottom that connected to the back of one of the tall computers. The shelf jumped and the flask jiggled. Mike turned to grab it, but knocked into it again, tipping the shelf bracket sideways, tipping the shelf ever so slightly to the floor. He spun around and tried to grab it, but only proceeded to bump the flask upward. Off balance, he swiped at it in vain and it tipped and warbled in the holder, then sort of spun out. Mike froze, stunned in fear. I went ice cold as I witnessed the glass flask with a blue plastic cap, nothing more than a short, wide cup really, teeter back and forth and wobble as it spun around the rim of the holder. The golden liquid inside spun as well, looking like a quarter of an inch of apple cider.

Instinctively, Mike reached for the flask again. But it warbled unpredictably into the side of Mike's fingers as it spun awkwardly. It bounced off his hand, lifted to spin off the edge of the shelf, and plunged to the floor as if in slow motion.

We both jumped back to avoid the splash of glass. But the flask just hit the clean tile floor with a "bonk" and rolled around, settling on its side. I slumped in relief. Mike stared at the flask, as if to ponder some further conclusion or action. Then he looked over to me and smiled, relieved. He leaned to reach to retrieve the flask, and as he did we heard a slight hissing sound. I crouched to lean in. The little bit of golden liquid in the jar bubbled slightly, as if the stirring action had activated something.

The flask had rolled to a stop and rested on its side. I guess I thought the liquid

would hit with a wet “splat” and shatter the glass. But all that happened was a line of steam circled from the bottom where the tube was connected, as if the fall had loosened up the gasket around the tube or something. I leaned and looked it over, shining my light on it, and it looked as if the seal was fine. But sure enough, there was a thin line of steam rising from where the tube connected on the bottom. It became a slow curl of mist, as if the liquid had been activated by the movement and was now smoldering. The mist rose slowly to curl and collect. We couldn't help but watch. It was magnificent, like watching a waterfall of smoke going backwards.

The mist continued to seep out in a rippling column, and then spread out about five feet off the floor to form a sort of fog that billowed outward like a rolling, translucent cloud.

Mike and I stepped back to the door, watching the mist of fog grow in the garage. We turned and ran out, careful to close the door behind us. Mike even jiggled the knob to make sure the seal was tight. Then we scampered low in the darkness, back to the bushes in the back of the yard. We crawled under the cover of leaves, flopped to our bellies, and looked back. We moved our lights and saw the mist slowly curling from the keyhole.

The mist seemed to grow thicker, forming a smoke-like cloud that hung around the door, about two feet above the sidewalk. More mist slowly billowed from the doorknob, building to feed the cloud. As the cloud grew thicker it seemed to sag, becoming heavier, and then roll out more, over the grass and some plants at the base of the garage. We watched the grass change colors as the mist settled over it, the plants slowly wilting. A tall bush slowly flopped over and shriveled, changing from a dark green to a golden brown. The flowers at the side of the house wilted one by one, just curling up, turning a golden brown and flopping over.

Suddenly an amber light flashed to throb inside the house as the strange translucent mist of fog slowly rolled across the backyard, now about a foot off the ground, turning the grass brown. It was now a foot tall wave of light gray smoke that undulated and twisted as it advanced.

The light in the window pulsed. A shadow appeared in the dark window. A muffled, “Oh no! . . . No! . . . Oh my! . . . No! . . . No!” bounced around inside the house. Another dark figure rushed to the window. “It can't be. . . It's really happening! . . .” And then another. “The Stinge. . . Oh, my, not the Stinge. . . Not here. . .” One figure ran about frantically. Another dropped to his knees. The last one just waved his arms about, as if to somehow stop the cloud with wild gestures. I watched as if they were trapped inside that container of house, trapped as if anything they did would be futile against the invisible waves of weirdness.

Mike and I both crawled backwards, through the overgrowth and into the tall grass of the field. We watched for a moment, then turned to trudge through that tall grass that separated our worlds as if the fields were vast oceans separating entire existences, entire notions, systems of beliefs, ways of seeing things.

The mist hit the tall shrubs and they slowly folded right over, one by one, and then the undergrowth drooped as well.

“Poison,” Mike whispered. “A very special poison.”

“Some new pesticide or something?” I questioned as we stepped back from the approaching cloud, “Maybe a military thing. A weapon?”

A bird dropped out of the sky and landed right in front of us. We searched for it in the tall grass. I moved my light on it. It was frozen stiff, wrinkled and discolored.

We stepped back, turned and ran. The smoky mist curled and weaved thick and thin strings of fog, stirring as it slowly rolled over the undergrowth and into the field.

We ran through the tall grass, looking back over our shoulders, shining our lights behind us. The height and density of the field grass seemed to momentarily slow the fog. A figure appeared at the edge of the field. He seemed to have on a bulky plastic suit, with a mask and a tank strapped to his back. “Someone’s down there,” he pointed to us, his voice being amplified mechanically. “Alert the agency.”

We chugged and chugged, looking back at the figure crouching and stiffly pointing to us. “There! . . . Down there!”

The wind seemed to carry large smoky strings of mist high into the air as it hit the tall grass. The clouds had moved off and thus with the bright moon exposed, we could now see much better. We watched as the tall grass behind us dropped, turning from yellow and green to wheat white and golden brown.

“The motorbike,” I huffed. “The bike. . . Get the bike.”

Mike and I hopped and jumped over the long grass, bounding to the creek. We jumped over a line of bushes at the edge of the field and rolled into the weeds at the creek side. We crawled on the ground, as if swimming in the long grass, then scrambled frantically on our knees, popping to our feet, looking around. We scrambled to find the bike, which we had hidden in the tall weeds at the bank of the creek.

“Hope it runs,” Mike huffed nervously, parting the weeds, his head darting.

“Please be full of gas, please,” I pleaded as I leaned and searched, also glancing up to watch for the cloud.

Mike bent down and propped up the bike, mounted it, worked the clutch and kick-started it. It sputtered a few times, then finally, luckily hummed and buzzed to life, spitting out a thin cloud of light gray exhaust.

I ran over and jumped on and we shot ahead, back down the narrow path as grass around us flattened, just dropping to fall like heavy, wet noodles. I looked back and saw the mist was almost at us now. But we luckily gained momentum and speed and galloped ahead as Mike gunned the throttle. The fog was maybe three feet behind us, but at our sides it was already ahead of us, dropping tall grass like tall buildings being demolished by high explosives, just falling straight down, as if imploding in on itself or going limp, some tipping right over like a majestic redwoods in the forest.

“What was that concoction?” I shouted over the pattering whine of the little engine as I clutched Mike’s midsection.

Mike just shrugged as he leaned ahead, trying to outrun the cloud of haze, riding the motorbike in terror. My stomach was heavy with fear, my arms shaking, wishing it would all be over, wishing the cloud would dissipate, hoping it was all just a bad dream.

The strange thing was that there was no awful odor in the air. No rancid rotten egg stench. No pungent, stinging, stomach-curdling reek. The night was still cool, wet, and refreshing, a moist freshness to it all.

Mike leaned forward and gunned the bike ahead, changing gears as fast as the little thing would putter, hum, and buzz – the grass, trees, bushes, and plants dying around us – block after block of lifeless wasteland and discoloration until it finally slowed, the death fog finally dissipating.

We slowed, then looped around to face it. It seemed to cease its advance. The mist seemed to be slowly fading and less dense. What little was left was blowing backward in the wind, curling up into the night sky and spreading out to fade as if hitting an invisible glass wall.

We looked around. In the moonlight, the grass seemed to be less yellow here. We were back in our neighborhood, about a half mile from the lab in that garage, maybe five or six blocks total. There were splotches of pea green grass about. We scanned behind ourselves. The grass up ahead seemed fine, a natural green to it. We heard a helicopter in the distance. And then another. And then another, the thunder of their engines thumping in our hollow chests.

“Let’s get out of here,” I huffed in fear, as if I had run the entire distance from the garage.

Mike gunned the accelerator again and we spun around, jumped ahead, peeling out and doing a wheelie down the block, me hanging on for dear life, terrified of being left behind. We whipped around, shooting off the street and into the grass to our side, under a canopy of trees to use as cover from the helicopters approaching from the direction of the fog.

We bounced over the undulating carpet of grass and into a large plume of bushes. We dismounted and waited expectantly, laying the bike down under the cover of the many branches and leaves, knowing that our silence would be our best cover. We listened for the choppers, and sure enough one grew louder than the others in the distance.

“Bet they’re checkin’ out every corner of the damage,” I whispered.

“Yeah,” Mike nodded as he crouched and searched the sky.

Sure enough, a helo passed about a block in front of us. It stopped, hovered there for a moment, just checking things over, assessing the extent of the incident. Then it swung down and hovered a block from where the mist had dissipated. The copter hung there for a few moments, then flew back to the direction of the secret lab.

Mike and I waited awhile, hearing what sounded like even more helos in the distance. Then we crept out of the bushes, back into the shadows and off to our houses under the cover of darkness.

The next morning Mike called and we agreed to meet up. We crept back to the bushes where we hid the motorbike we found. We crawled out and crept in the shadows, behind houses, garages, bushes, berms, cars, campers, and boats until we got around to where the fog had stopped its rolling advance. We hid behind a grassy berm and crawled to peer over it.

We saw the police had the road blocked off with two squad cars. We could see bare trees in the distance, their bark gray and weathered as if very old, their branches empty of leaves. Some of the branches were drooping, as if made of rubber.

Several of the trees closer to us had only some small clumps of tan leaves stuck to them, the breeze blowing some of the leaves off. Some of the crisp, tan leaves were blown high in the air as dried and curled evidence of ruin, specks of death hung in the air, circling above on the breeze, reminding us of what we did, dancing above to taunt us.

“It’s our fault,” I whispered.

“We didn’t cook up the concoction,” sighed Mike.

“It’s our fault,” I repeated to myself, “All the waste.”

The entire scene before us looked like late winter without the snow, but it was August. Hot and dry, everything barren.

Several school buses rumbled past our view on the road, around the two police cars blocking the road. They turned and drove onto a lawn, around the squad cars, and out of the neighborhood. Their windows were covered in newspaper. Then two white vans came into view, from around a garage that blocked our perspective, onto the grass of the lawn and around the police cars and followed the buses out of the neighborhood.

Several police officers stepped from the cars as if getting the “all clear” sign. They looked around, then leaned casually against the cars. We could hear them talking, but couldn’t tell what they were saying. They looked bored. A highway patrol car pulled up from the other direction, from the unaffected area. It was followed by an unmarked sedan that had an official, ominous air about it. It was still very early.

If it were just the local authorities, then we figured we were safe. But now it looked like the state and maybe even federal agencies were arriving.

I put my face down, into the grass. “Oh, man,” I wheezed, “It’s all dying, and ever so quickly.”

“Relax,” Mike whispered. “It’s not our fault. They shouldn’t’ve been cookin’ up that stew in the first place. . . Geez. We didn’t make the stuff.”

“It’s like we caught the shame,” I exhaled. “We spent too much time around those disgraced civilians. That taint is on us now. . .” A sense of dread filled me. I knew we were going to get into a lot of trouble on this one. A lot of trouble. Even if we hid, somehow I knew they would find us and pin this on us.

“You’re being superstitious, man,” Mike shook his head and whispered, “Even if we caught a taint, it would’ve blown off us in the wind as we rode the bike back here last night. We weren’t around them long enough to catch their taint anyway.”

“Uuuggghhh,” I exhaled in a frustrated whisper of pain.

“People get upset at people who gain too much attention. They try to pull them back down in desperation,” Mike punched me hard in the arm. “It’s just the way it goes. Everyone just piled on ‘em. It was just their turn to take their lumps. Who knows, it’ll probably make them more humble people, so it’s not such a bad thing.”

“Your philosophizing won’t bring the plants back,” I groaned, “It’s a wasteland out there.”

The highway patrol and unmarked sedan stopped and some serious, official looking chaps stepped from the highway patrol car. They approached the cops and conversed. Slowly I scanned the faces. I recognized all the local police officers from our various exploits about town. One of the local police officers looked down at a clipboard he was holding, then back up and nodded to the house to the side of them.

One of the highway patrolmen turned to the unmarked car and nodded to the house. Three men in suits disembarked from the unmarked sedan and slowly, calmly walked to the house next to them. The suspense was excruciating. It seemed to take forever for them to reach the front door. Mike and I did not breathe. We had no idea what was going to happen. The scene was a ghost town. Reason and common sense had long since fled the area. That feeling felt even worse than last night. I scanned the area. We

basically only had a view between two garages. But every plant was dead. All the trees. All the grass. All the flowers, shrubs, and bushes before us were gone. There were no birds in the sky. Nothing. Everything was eerily quiet. The place was a sick cream color, with blotches of tan and brown.

The three men in suits knocked at the door. There was no answer. One tried the door latch, but it didn't open. The two others leaned to peer in windows. One knocked on the big living room picture window with a rattling bang bang bang. The air seemed to grow even more silent in contrast with the banging. There was a scariness in the air. It was a scary kind of silence, an empty void, a menacing silence, as if the rest of the planet disappeared and this was all that was left. There was a desperate loneliness about the area.

Mike looked up, watching several random dead leaves blow past high above.

We looked back over to the house across the street. The agent at the door leaned down, removed something from his suit coat, placed it in the keyhole, fiddled with it, and opened the door. Two of the agents slunk inside. One stayed outside, leaning against the side of the house, watching the open door. Moments later the windows began to open. One of the agents stuck his head out. "No one," he shrugged.

"Check it out," Mike nudged me, "All the windows are open."

I looked around. Sure enough, every window in the neighborhood was open, some with curtains fluttering in the slight morning breeze.

"Must've evacuated everyone last night," I whispered to myself, gripping the ground in fear. The grass was moist and full, a fresh and healthy dark green, but up ahead most of the neighborhood must've been ruined, stained with a golden brown death. I noticed patches of the ground began to show here and there, as if the wind was blowing the expired grass away as well. I looked around and saw blades of brown grass swirling in the wind above. Beyond that was just a blank line, a tan and brown wasteland. Far off all the plants were gone now. All signs of life erased, the field beyond a mass of dark brown soil. What was once a sea of grass separating our worlds was now a brown stain, soon maybe to be an arid desert.

"Probably just a precaution," Mike nodded, thinking, "Like, . . . yeah."

Two large army trucks rumbled onto the scene, two troop carriers moving into the infected area, up on the lawn and around the police cars blocking the street, the army trucks thundering to the infected region. The last truck had three people clinging to the back, standing on the bumper, with gas masks and covered in puffy yellow plastic, with tanks strapped to their backs.

The two trucks rumbled past and all was deadly quiet again, just the breeze, as if

everything else in the world were now gone, as if another victim of our midnight adventure.

Mike nudged me and looked over to the area that was unaffected. All the windows were closed, the grass green as could be, the trees rich and full. Then a muffled scream shot through the gentle summer breeze. The men in the suits ran out of the house to the one next door. The men rushed across the lawn, but before they could get to the next house, a man in pajamas stumbled out the door and staggered down the front steps. He was twisting and turning, all bent over, so we couldn't get a good look at him.

The agents rushed up and grabbed him, but he twisted free. Then he looked up and we got a good view of him, all twisted up and gnarled, his arms curled in as if made of rubber hoses, his back humped and curved as if his bones had turned to limp noodles. Some strange strings grew from his bald head. The strings looked like long, thin hot dogs or thick spaghetti. The staggering man twirled in the yard, the agents stepping back away from him as if his condition was contagious. When the staggering man hit the breeze, the thick strings on his head began wiggling in the wind, as if taking on air or sustenance or something.

The agents in suits collected themselves and rushed to the man. The other agent who had been leaning against the house ran over as well. When they got to the staggering man, he collapsed on his sidewalk and curled up, as if his bones had gone completely soft.

One of the agents looked to the police officers in the street. "It's gotten this far. Move the barricades up another four blocks," the agent waved. "Call the others."

A woman staggered out of the house, huffing in horror, bending at the waist in exhaustion from the emotional strain. She was also in her pajamas, as if just waking. She covered her face and collapsed into one of the agent's arms. Her hair was mostly gone, and in its place were what looked like several small arms growing out of her head.

Several helicopters appeared as dots on the horizon, heading this way – maybe five or six of them. Mike grabbed my sleeve and we rolled down the embankment. We ran to a line of trees and bushes. We ran in the direction of our houses and stopped under the trees, hidden behind the bushes. We watched the helicopters grow closer, two of them hovering over the house the two people stumbled out of, the other helos drifted off to the direction of the secret lab garage.

We heard the police cars start, the doors slamming, the cars screeching around in a hurry. Suddenly one of the cars came over the embankment, and then the other, rushing in the grass, bouncing over the small ruts and undulations of turf, right past us, running from the scene as if in a panic, bouncing over the lawns to get away.

Mike turned and ran the other way. I watched a police car pass. Inside the officer's arm was curled up like a whip, over his shoulder, the hair on the side of his head was gone, the skin on his face sagging. The car slid past, curving around another house. I heard a crashing sound. I dropped to the ground, covered my arms around my knees, hid my head close to the ground as the other police car roared past. A moment later I heard another crash. I rolled around in fear, finally climbing to my feet. I ran. I ran and ran, to the green, to the thick bushes. There was a lump on the fresh green lawn up ahead. I watched it as I passed. It was all curled up, curled arms, curled legs, back curving. It was Mike, all curled up. I ran and ran. I ran to my house, to wash it all off, to cleanse it from me, the leaves full in the trees, the grass fresh, green, and thick, the breeze cool and full.