

CHAPTER 3

Holly was much more wary about what went on along her street than she used to be now that Mr. Colletti was gone. She made a point of looking up and down the block when she left her house, suspiciously noted every strange car or person within a one block radius of her house.

Two months passed. Since his murder, and for all Holly and her neighbor Mona knew, the killer had not been apprehended. Holly formulated an idea of what happened but the detectives never questioned her again. She never had the chance to find out what really happened.

Without knowing anything about Mr. Colletti, Holly decided he was gambling at the casinos in Atlantic City. He must have gotten into trouble, borrowed more than he had from a loan shark. Holly didn't know any loan sharks and really didn't even know if the reality was very much different from television thugs. Nevertheless, there was Mr. Colletti, deep into a loan shark for untold millions that he couldn't possibly pay back, let alone with forty percent compounded daily. He had probably been threatened, given ample opportunity to come clean and pay back what he didn't have and could not get. Maybe they broke a leg or arm, maybe they threatened his wife.

The writer in her scaled new heights. Holly formulated the plot of her blockbuster novel. Mr. Colletti stood at the helm with the nosy neighbor who gets in the way of the investigation. A nasty, rough, defeated but classic detective is assigned to the task of bringing the culprit, who is a bloodthirsty killer, to justice.

Her creative juices flowed. Nothing got in the way of her imagination or her fingers, which clanked away at her computer for hours on end. She only broke to feed her family and to visit the powder room. She was possessed, obsessed, and refused any suggestion that she take a break to eat or sleep.

The phrases came so quickly that her fingers could not keep up with her mind. She bought herself a recorder and walked around the house, the block, the car, anywhere that she found herself and recorded her plot. She erased, re-spoke, taped, typed, and cranked out a rough first draft before the summer was in full swing.

Mrs. Colletti put the house up for sale, decided to join her eldest son in Phoenix. She had been asked thousands of questions by dozens of people. Police officers, insurance investigators and reporters hounded her. Each attempted to place blame where they could in an effort to refuse payment, close the case.

Holly was again flooded with material. She added, subtracted, changed, and rewrote history in her own version of possibilities.

One day, Mona and Holly talked about it. Holly loved to ask subtle questions of her, first of all because Mona was a snoop and second because she would answer the questions without realizing that Holly had a purpose for asking them in the first place. Was she using Mona? No, Holly didn't think so. No, they would have gone on and on about it anyway. Holly didn't give it another moment's thought. She liked Mona; she was basically harmless. Holly liked how Mona looked and she was pleasant to be with. Mona was all bouncy blond curls and a curly disposition, volatile and passionate. Holly liked that about her, and also the fact that as far as Holly knew, she hadn't been the object of Mona's gossip.

To Holly, oh my, how Mona could gossip senselessly! Unaware that Holly took mental notes of her words, expressions, and demeanor, Mona was more talk than action even as she

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claimed how she'd have fought off the madman. She was a wonderful character study for Holly and it surely filled the hours.

Holly made sandwiches, gave her coffee, nodded as she rambled on and on about how Mrs. Colletti sold everything in the house from her pots and pans to her picture albums as though none of it meant anything at all to her. Mona speculated as to whether Mrs. Colletti was starting a new life in an effort to ease the pain. Maybe, she went on, she was resuming an old secret life. Now that the husband was out of the picture for good, his killer, her sixty-eight year old lover, planned their retirement in Fiji, not six months after the old coot was cold in his grave. Mona made all this up over roast beef specials and diet soda, hold the pickles. Life had never been so exciting. Holly listened and nodded, helped Mona sort out her ideas. After Mona left, she'd run to the office, turn on the computer and feverishly type out new scenes that would become the background of her story. Of course, it was Holly's twist on things and not Mona's suppositions. It was good fodder, just to listen to Mona. It was, Holly thought, inspirational. It got her imagination fired up and ready to rock.

Could she get sued? Holly wondered if literary license went too far in writing about something so close to home. The story, Holly thought, could become anything that she wanted, depending on the actual outcome of the case. It could be nonfiction if she chose to write what really happened, once the killer was found, that was. On the other hand, she could change the location, the names and the circumstances to fit her mood. After all, she thought, wasn't that what literary license was all about? This then, was finally the spark that would become her future novel, her dream of being an author, not dinky little articles about nonsense that no one cared about, that were forgotten and used for birdcage liner or cut outs for collages. This would be *the big one*.

Holly fantasized, dreamed of the talk show circuit where she would be able to flatter herself with how easily it all came to her once the idea became a reality.

She thought of little else. She was a total bore to her friends and family but couldn't help herself once it all got started. They would understand, Holly felt sure, that this was what it had all been about, all the years and hours of work and research. This, she knew, would be her big payoff.

Between March when the murder occurred and June, when the first draft of her story was complete, Holly was compelled to do nothing but write, read, and write some more. The hang up calls were ignored. She had tunnel vision. The death of Stella, her dog, was devastating to the entire family and the veterinarian claimed that it had been a heart attack. However, Holly didn't think to ask how a four-year old dog could have a heart attack or if it was unusual for her breed or age. It was left alone. She was too obsessed just then. She was grateful for the diversion of her book to distract her from the loss of Stella, her beloved Stella.

In late June, Holly and Peter decided that it was time that they took a vacation at the beach. They rented a townhouse in Brigantine, New Jersey, north of Atlantic City and on the bay side instead of the ocean side of the island. The bedrooms were on the first floor. From the living room, dining room, and den windows above, they had a wonderful view of the city and beyond that, the ocean. It was spacious, had enough bedrooms and just about everything that she needed. Except a computer. Ah, well, that too could wait for her return to the city.

It was all set. Peter rented a van for the exodus. He joked that the pilgrimage could have been for a year judging by the amount he loaded into the hatch.

Holly smacked his bottom. "Tote that bail, haul that barge, slave!"

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Peter grabbed her around the waist, threw her into the still empty cargo space of the van, and washed her head, neck and face with kisses.

"Brute! Unhand me, cad!"

"Never, woman, you're mine! All mine!" He buried his face in her ample chest and she screamed and laughed. They laughed and almost rolled right out of the car and onto the driveway.

"Peter, the neighbors! God you animal, they'll have what to talk about for months! Control yourself, beast! Unhand me!"

Yell she might But Holly's laughter and eyes demanded more, not less. When the three kids found them on the front drive, playing like puppies, they screamed with disgust although they too had laughter in their young eyes and smiles on their faces. Mommy and Daddy were playing.

Peter and Holly faked being caught red handed and sat up, hiding from the children. Then Holly grabbed Erin while Peter grabbed Carly and Shawn. They rolled, tickled and played in the driveway. The kids joined in the attack, tickling, playing and screaming with pleasure.

They didn't notice the car that drove past their house in time to see the frolicking on the lawn.

Peter drove the van while Holly drove the car, Carly and Erin in the back seat. Shawn went with his father. They played cat and mouse on the highway, passed back and forth behind one another as the children laughed and sang. Erin asked if they had arrived yet thirty-even times. Carly counted. Even though it was only a seventy-five mile trip, they stopped for the bathroom three times and once for lunch at the Frank Farley rest station. Shawn called it the fart station and Peter shoved his shoulder.

When they arrived, Peter walked through the dark and musty dwelling with Holly. She threw open windows, lifted blinds and turned on the air conditioner. The kids ran from room to room and each claimed their own territory.

Then they ran through the master bedroom to the sliding door, to the deck out back. From there they viewed the bay and turned their noses up to the smell of water.

To Holly it was a smell as wonderful as roses; the aroma of the sea, the breath and depths the last unmarred wilderness, as unfathomable as the throat of a volcano. She filled herself up with it as she watched their reactions. Peter came and stood beside her as they watched the kids run this way and that, as they opened closets and yelled, "This one's mine!" or "I get this bed!"

To the children, she knew, it could become an imbedded memory, the aroma of the ocean a trigger. The smell that would last a lifetime and offer a memory of the day. At least, Holly hoped it would be so. There were few times that she could identify as being pivotal and too often, she thought that she didn't realize the significance of the occasion until it was too late. The last time she saw her father and said goodbye so casually. The last time she saw Stella and didn't realize that it would not be long before Stella was no more. How heartbroken Holly was, and how it stabbed at her that she'd only given Stella a cursory pat-pat on the noggin when she'd left the house that day! Now it pained her and just thinking about poor Stella, dying all alone without someone to say goodbye to her, set creases in Holly's forehead and dimmed the shinning

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moment that this was for them. Stella should be there with them, dancing with delight from one spot to another, new smells jumping her from one corner to the next.

Holly shook it out, not that this was a presumption of impending doom. Not a time for reflection or introspection, but for the kids it was quite possibly one of those childhood memories that meant the beach, their parents loving and happy, their lives full of anticipation and potential. Maybe not a pivotal moment, but a good one for the memory book was all. That was all.

Holly shook her head a bit and dismissed her ruminations. She folded her arms and leaned on the slider, watched them bounce and laugh, smile and claim their new digs. It was humid enough to feel the air, feel it on her cheeks and see it on their foreheads. Erin always had a bead or two of sweat on the little indentation between her mouth and nose. Holly was sure that spot had a name but she didn't know it. Shawn's face always flushed pink. It was adorable. And Carly, well, she was getting so mature so fast that she was too cool for her own britches, even as she was getting to the age to need deodorant and eau de toilette.

Nevertheless, for just then, they were just her kids and it was only the smell of the bay, fish and salt air that tickled the senses with a pungent tartness, a thickness of wet blankets, heavy and viscous. Holly senses were jolted.

Peter kissed her on her forehead. His aftershave whispered to her. He had seen her introspection; she could see it in his eyes. It was startling to Holly when first presented with the vastness of the ocean, a never-ending closeness to the last piece of land. Then her nose grew accustomed to the pleasure, the effect dulled, a briskness of its fingers lapping around her, finite and familiar. Peter kissed her and his aftershave tickled, aroma on top of aroma.

It didn't last long. Her olfactory sense faded. Then the only lasting impression was draped moisture, a musty dampness that touched the hair, skin, enveloped everything within reach, let them know that they were there, by the sea, at the beach. She tasted it in her mouth, an after taste that lingered as the flavor of raw oysters stayed thick and slippery on her tongue. The children could not yet know the quality of the moment, the simple pleasure and lasting impression their explorations might imbue. Much later in their lives they might recall impressions of the bay; the smells, humidity, the happiness of being in a new place, shrouded within the womb of their family. Holly sensed it as she smelled salt air and she felt happy, almost giddy. It was that thick, that palpable to her at that moment. Almost a vision of the future looking at the past, a motherly premonition that this was special, important. A good moment to count as one might gaze on a rare stone of unequalled magnificence.

She breathed deep and returned into the house. She left the slider open to air interior mustiness.

Peter unloaded the van as Holly unpacked, placed one box, suitcase, or bag, after another in the designated room to be emptied. First was to unpack food, second; deliver snacks to the hungry crowd and then third; delegate into which room the rest of the belongings should go at the hands of small short little people. The whole process took two hours. At its conclusion, Holly and Peter were ready to settle down with a beer on the deck, the children learning the layout of their new digs.

They spent the rest of the day learning their way around the small town, first stocking up on food for breakfast and small necessities that were too inconsequential to bring, but imperative to their stay. Film, beer, cups, laundry detergent, coffee, plastic forks and knives, spoons and napkins, fruit and cereal, and sun tan lotion were high on the list.

They barbecued chicken and hot dogs on the deck and then drove to Ocean City, to the Wonderland Amusement Park. They rode the Log Flume ride that dripped on people that

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walking below it. They rode the monorail and the Galleon Ship, screamed as the breeze blew their hair forward and then sharply smacked it back again. Holly and Erin stayed on the teacups and ladybug rides.

The children loved the sights, the rides, the junk food, and the fun. They were finally put to bed by eleven, exhausted and elated. Peter and Holly settled down by midnight.

They dozed into a deep sleep that only comes by the ocean. The hypnotic sounds of high tide and the dim presence of a milky night sky teasing a pregnant full moon lulled them into safe dreams of childhood trips to the beach. When they awoke, they felt refreshed and ready to do it again.

The children, in a new home temporarily, climbed onto Peter and Holly's bed, snuggled in for a long doze, wrapped in the familiar nooks and crannies that were their parents.

Holly rolled over. Bright dawn drifted through voile curtains. The children smelled of innocent sleep. She smiled a thankful tiny smile. The only one missing was Stella. Holly missed her sorely and swore never to have another pet, as not one would ever be able to capture Holly's true love and affection as Stella had. She had lost her best friend--that is, besides Peter.

On Sunday night, Peter readied the van for the drive back to Philadelphia, to his empty house. The children kissed and hugged him as though he were leaving for a month, Erin clinging around his neck where she was perched up on his hip.

"Don't go, Daddy! No go!"

He hugged her close. "You be a good girl for Daddy, ok? I will be back Friday, Sweet Pea."

Holly waited her turn after the children tired of clambering for his attention. Peter held Holly tight for a long pause.

It would have to last the week. They gave hugs and kisses for every day they'd be apart.

His return drive was uneventful on the long straight road of the Atlantic City Expressway. Uneventful but tedious. Too much traffic and boredom on Sunday nights. A trail of cars that was solid for sixty miles on a two-lane highway, moving at sixty miles an hour. Red taillights a blurred dotted ribbon that stretched from the Margate bridge to the Walt Whitman Bridge in Philadelphia. The road sliced the Pine Barrens, as wide as New Jersey, dense forest only occasionally broken by a billboard here and there. Caesar's Palace, the Sands Casino, as well as strategically placed signs that read; *Stay Awake, Drive Carefully, Stay Alert, Stay Alive*. That was how boring that ride could be. Hypnotic. Peter marveled at the fact that no matter how many times he made the trek, he still read those signs, as if maybe somehow they'd miraculously changed since the last time?

When he arrived home, the stark silence of the house startled him. He was not used to the absence of running, laughing or fighting that had become as familiar as brushing his teeth.

He was very tired from the drive. The darkness of the road that contrasted with white lane lines was still fresh in his mind in a continual flash-flash of movement.

He turned on the television to create sound, poured himself a scotch, and retired to the easy chair in the den to watch the late news. He vegged for a half hour, dosed with his head bobbing now and then. Stiff, he finally got up and went to his room. He chose his clothes for Monday, brushed his teeth, performed his nightly ritual of fifty pushups and sit-ups, and went to bed.

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The pillows smelled as they should have, like him and Holly. It was comforting, reminiscent. He hugged her pillow, no substitute, to him. No light streamed into the room at all, the night light in the hall unnecessary with the children gone. Heavy velvet drapes hung low, enveloped the room in a cocoon of grey and burgundy, dark and quiet. He turned on his side and slid deeper and deeper into darkness, into sleep as he hazily asked if Holly would be fine down there without him. He didn't remember answering, only recollected thinking that he should call her first thing in the morning.

Peter's business kept him very busy during the following week. He had little time to ponder the desperate silence in his house. He thought about it only as he turned out lights and locked up the house. He listened to still shadows as he climbed stairs and walked to his room. He saw perfume bottles and Holly's towel neatly hung on a bathroom hook. He felt it. The towel was dry. He gathered it to him and smelled it. A lingering scent of gardenia gave him reason to smile.

Alarm clock! It blaringly called out traffic conditions at five o'clock. Peter drug himself, with groans, out of bed, rubbing his hair and issuing a loud belch. He showered and dressed quickly. Downstairs, he grabbed the orange juice from the frig and swigged from it; one, two, three big gulps. Out the door by five-thirty. It was still dark.

He grabbed coffee at the Dunkin' Donuts, and set out to his job. It was still dark at that hour at six but Peter was used to rising and retiring in the dark. It was part of his life.

Peter had worked for years reconstructing historical sites in Philadelphia to their original specs with the help of his partner, Joseph DiAngelo. They restored offices, museums and homes. A few years back, they were commissioned to remodel the Pegasus, one four hundred thirty-nine foot Clipper that was part of the Royal Ocean line of sailing ships.

When they switched over to residential construction, they prided themselves on an updated colonial style that was classic and forward thinking. DiAngelo and Towler become synonymous with Stoller Brothers or Matero, the largest builders in the area. Their current development in Montgomery Township was in its first phase, with fifteen single colonial homes in graduated degrees of construction. Three samples had been completed since November. The sales offices were set up in the first, which faced outward from a cul-de-sac of five homes. The samples were each different; a colonial, a split level, and one monster--a six thousand square foot contemporary home on a half acre lot, backing up to a wooded common lot, complete with an indoor gym, fireplace and sauna in the master suite.

The other ten homes were off of the cul-de-sac in small branches (not quite streets) which allowed privacy as well as maximum usage of the surrounding landscape, affording the owners small but long dogwood lined lanes leading to each house.

Phases two, three, and four would branch off of the first phase. The approach was a street originating off the first, circling access road to quiet streets lined with maples and oaks, with a minimum vision to neighbors on either side. The proximity to the major roads; Routes 309 and 202, would allow access to Philadelphia, New York, the Pocono mountains, or upstate Pennsylvania.

Phase One had been sold out since April. Phases two and three were moving nicely. Phase four was still in development. That would probably sell out by year's end. Peter and Joseph were confident and pleased with how well the development was going. On a daily basis

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they arrived before the men, oversaw the construction, management, contract agreements and locations.

Peter usually arrived after Joseph and would bring him a second cup of coffee and round of doughnuts from the Dunkin' Donuts at 309 and County Line Road. Joseph would thank him kindly, needed the second shot of caffeine and sugar to kick in before lunch at ten-thirty.

Peter and Joseph would then walk the site, make notes of what was not on schedule and what needed to be done. They would argue about supplies, their men and the tight schedule of heavy equipment. They did this every day and every day it was the same routine. They would inspect their progress, note that the foundation was to be laid on this one, the frame to be built on that one, the electricians were ready for this one, and the plumbing was complete on that one.

The men would begin to arrive and already be working by six-thirty, and they would see the same thing every morning; Peter and Joseph walking the site, making notes and delegating to the foremen. On this development, it had been that way for over a year. The men knew that their two bosses, as well as the foremen, knew exactly what was going on in all aspects of the job. They would wave to the men, talk sports or joke about the weather. There were no absentee bosses here. Peter and Joe would then retreat to the construction trailer, which served as their office for everything from floor plans to making phone calls. Everything was well managed, maintained, and on schedule. They were well respected, the best, and they all knew it.

Thus, Peter spent his week. He woke up, went to work, went home, called Holly and the kids, ate and went to sleep by nine-thirty. He took advantage of the break from family schedules and obligations, and worked longer hours. He was tired when he came home, very tired. He enjoyed going to sleep earlier than normal for when the family was home he found that he stayed up with Holly. Now, he took advantage of a few hours of much needed sleep.

On Wednesday, Peter treated himself to a barbecued steak on the grill. It was lonely but last Sunday's Philadelphia Inquirer turned to the real estate section was always a good companion, cheered him up as he ate on the back patio, the early evening breeze warm and familiar, comfortable. He had salad and a Corona with the steak.

After returning home on Thursday, Peter showered the heat and dirt of the day away, relaxed in the kitchen over a pizza and beer. The quiet weighed heavy, Peter thought, and he picked up the remnants of the paper. He decided to see a movie to escape the void that was the empty house. He called Holly, who was having a wonderful time with the kids at the beach. She missed him and told him that Carly had caught a sand crab, Shawn had a slight sunburn, and Erin learned to wait two hours to get home to use the bathroom. They laughed. Peter told her that he would get there by nine on Friday night. Holly promised a bottle of wine and two lobsters waiting for him, with the hint of lust in her voice that made Peter smile and feel the heat of her memory rise in him. He could just picture her blushing; she still blushed and he loved that about her.

They said goodbye and Peter went to the movie theater in Ardmore to see an early show. He felt bored as he watched the movie and was home asleep by ten-thirty.

He was unaware that his schedule was being studied by the man in the dark car, which showed up to make a note of his comings and goings, day and night; where he went, at what time, and with whom.

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Peter spent the weekend with his family, and it was with a completely free mind that he enjoyed the two days that he had with them. They spent the days at the beach. Their friends, Mindy and Bryan, their children, and Peter's partner, Joseph and his wife Linda and their three kids jumped waves, played, ate, and sunbathed in quiet togetherness. They sunned, laughed and had a marvelous weekend.

Peter spent half an hour showing Erin the fine art of choosing seashells, placing them in her bucket to save. He then showed Shawn how to dig for sand crabs, to no avail. There weren't any around on that day, much to Shawn's chagrin. Then, he taught Carly how to slice through the small waves that seemed too enormous to overcome. At first she insisted on holding his hand and more than once, he had to pull her up over a wave that was ready to strike her down under roiling white foam, but as a half hour turned into an hour, bravery took over as she gained confidence in her strength. By the end of the day, she rolled her eyes at his over protectiveness. He laughed but still stayed close in case she got knocked over.

They videotaped the kids chasing sea gulls and a school of dolphins swimming off shore, at a safe but noticeable distance. It was one of those rare sights, even with the older kids scaring the little ones into believing that they were sharks. They all pretended to be dolphins jumping up and then landing into the sand head first, all except for Joseph, who pretended to be the shark, with Bryan adding the music from *Jaws* for effect. The women were hysterical, watched their otherwise civilized husbands being silly sharks with the children, all hamming it up for the camera, which they knew was on, capturing their antics; the children scattering away, screaming in fake horror as the fake Joseph shark ate his daughter, Jenna's, leg for dinner.

They had barbecued steaks, hot dogs, chicken, and corn on the cob, potato salad, salad, *Jell-O*, and cake for dinner at the townhouse in Brigantine. Later, they took all the kids to Ocean City to the rides at Wonderland on the boardwalk.

By the time the kids were asleep, Holly and Peter were totally exhausted but satisfied. They had done their parental best to offer summer bliss at the beach, evidenced by few spats between the kids, a healthy new coloring to their cheeks and sound sleeping. Was it there imagination, they asked, or did the kids sleep better down the shore than at home? Holly felt that the only comparable time (besides Christmas of course) was when they would invariably have monumental snow ball fights on the front lawn, poised with opposing forts ready to clobber the boys against the girls across the lawn. Peter always lost, of course, as was his lot in life and his job and duty as a good father. As usual, Holly would fake being caught off guard by a barrage of snowballs from all of them, fall, and then roll in the snow just as they were jumped by the three children. Then it would be hot chocolate for all, as tonight it had been ice cream for all.

On Sunday night, Peter made the long boring ride home again. He promised himself that next Friday he would take the Black Horse Pike down instead of the expressway, so he could stop at one of the roadside stands to buy blueberries, corn and Jersey tomatoes for Holly. At least it would be something different.

Ah, summer, Peter thought, as he drove in the long row of traffic, reading the *Stay Awake*, *Stay Alert*, *Stay Alive* signs as he drove. He loved summer. He cursed the driver in the car in front of him that kept stepping on the brake, causing him to do the same every quarter mile. The traffic was usually bad but tonight it was worse. It started to rain twelve miles out of Atlantic City and made the drive that much worse. The cars slowed to a crawl for no other reason than the drivers had to switch on wipers, which caused a break in the rhythm.

The tail lights from the cars in front of Peter became a red blur as the oncoming cars going the other direction became a white stream of blinding light. The rain intensified, made the

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windshield a wet slate. The wipers could not move fast enough. Back and forth, back and forth. Tapping on the steering wheel, blur of windshield and rain, rain. Break lights, blue. Go, stop. Horrible ride for three and a half hours! Only sixty miles to the bridge and then it would open up. Hopefully.

Peter turned on the radio to get a weather report, heard that the storm was moving west to east, calling for flooding of low-lying areas, small craft warnings at the shore, and power outages in several towns in the area.

"Great, just what I need," Peter cursed. He changed the station to KYW, the 24-hour news station, to hear more. He thought about work at the development, Montgomery Mews, hoped the retention walls would hold.

The rain was to continue into tomorrow and maybe clear by nightfall. Tuesday would be cloudy but then it would clear by afternoon. Peter was relieved, thought that they would only lose one day, which they had planned into the schedule anyway.

Peter was a slave to the weather reports and took to praying or cursing the skies, depending on how his building schedule was going. In bad summers, it rained every other day or so, made it impossible to calculate the best times to lay foundations and electrical with any amount of confidence. The past two summers cooperated, rained at night but cleared by morning so Peter didn't complain. It could have been far worse.

Traffic inched along. The rain blinded him from vertical sheets of perpetual motion, annoying drumming and pelting on the roof of the car. It normally took Peter two hours to get home on a Sunday night from the shore. Tonight, by the time that he pulled into his driveway, it had taken almost four.

Just running from the car to the porch Peter got soaked clear through his shirt. When he got into the hall, he shook off the rain, took off his tee shirt and dropped it in the kitchen sink.

Peter was in bed by eleven, waited to hear the weather report. He thought about calling Joseph, but he knew that he could still be on the ride home with his kids. He would see him tomorrow anyway, rain or shine, at the trailer. If not there then at the sample house. Peter went every day to the site, rain or shine. He thought about the fencing around the perimeter of the site, and worried momentarily about erosion, whether the fencing and plastic liners would hold.

He remembered when they were put in, remembered how excited Joseph had been when this project began. A new market, a new area, and a new product. It was only the third such project that they'd undertaken. The financing had been so much easier this time, with two successful developments behind them to use as a track record. It was no longer a question of if, but when.

As the news ended, Peter rolled over, thought that he would check the retentions walls tomorrow, rain or shine.

The storm of the century woke Peter up at three twenty-eight. It pounded the roof so hard that he thought it might collapse right on top of him. He listened to the wind howling through the trees outside. The drapes were down, sheltered the room in a protective embrace. The sound of the trees leaning into the wind was muffled but it registered on Peter's brain that there wasn't anything that might hold up out there. He thought about the kids and hoped that they were okay. He thought about lightning and thunder and knew that Erin slept in Holly's bed.

The trash cans were not in the garage. "Shit." He might never see them again. He chuckled, thought that they would be in Oz by morning. As he drifted back to sleep, Peter listened to the storm and the sounds of the house. The porch swing clanked against the front of the house, moving the swing sideways by three feet or more. The shutter must have come

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unhinged outside of Shawn's room because Peter could hear it clap clapping back against the house again and again.

Peter's last conscious thought was of Stella, long dead, who used to spend the night moaning softly on nights like this, hiding under their huge bed, probably wondering when the world would end. He missed Stella, even if she used to bark too much and shed too much. Fuzzy mutt, he thought dreamily.