

Fuzzie Man

CHRISTOPHER ALAN BROADSTONE

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Christopher Alan Broadstone

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PUZZLEMAN

A young sculptress despondently searching for understanding after the tragic death of her infant son . . .

A professor of history and a beautiful French vintner, still longing for the love they shared during World War II . . .

A legless man seeking retribution and escape from a horror worse than death . . .

A retired detective itching to get back in the game . . .

Disparate lives, yet each meticulously woven together over time to play a special part in the *Puzzlemans*' twisted vision of eternal life.

Into the black *Cathedral Fleur du Sang* and into *the pipes* they must go—into a terrifying world of *grumemonsters*, where the inaccuracies of accepted history and the gruesome future of mankind are laid bare. For Amanda Zimmerman, Professor John Rainbow, Jeannette Orfèvre, the legless man, and Detective Ben Henfry the *Puzzlemans* is a personal demon awakened into a living nightmare, and it's up to them alone to wage their fight for sanity and salvation—a fight that swells into a harrowing escape spanning two continents, and the supernatural perversion of time and dimension. Welcome to the *pipeworld*.

Welcome to truth and eternity.

Welcome to the world of the *Puzzlemans*.

SPECIAL THANKS

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THIS BOOK

. . . is dedicated to my mother and father, Billie and D.C. Broadstone, and my grandmother, Burnetta Whitson. Thank you for always believing in me, no matter how mad my ambitions or how twisted my imagination.

The First Piece

“How much?”

“Fifty bucks.”

“Forget it!”

“How ‘bouts a dirty thirty-five?”

“Thirty-five . . . *dollars*? For this? Where’s the other one?”

“Ain’t got it. It’s da only one I gots. Tha dude—da artist—hey look, he only made one. Jus’ one, okay?”

“Yeah, well, I always like a set. Neat and matched.”

“Please, darlin’, I gots t’eat.”

“I’m not your *darlin’*, mister.”

“Good God, lady, ya tryin’ t’kill me *an’* m’business?”

“What the hell is this? Right here.”

“Now dat’s character, if I ever seen it.”

“It’s tarnished.”

“Ain’t no tarnish. It’s pure t’da core, sho’n’shor.”

“It’s rusted.”

“What?”

“I said it’s jacked . . . up.”

“Holy Mutha . . . now I ain’t stupid an’ I know f’sho ya ain’t out in da street t’buy fer da gold. Dis’s Elm Street, Dallas, Texas. It sho ain’t Fifth Avenue an’ it sho ain’t Wall Street. Yer out here t’pick up on some art, some peoples’ thoughts’n’sweat’n’blood. Ain’t dat right? Hell yeah it is! You know da art when ya see it. I can tell it in yer eyes. I can tell ya see a puzzle in da art, *don’cha?*”

“I don’t like puzzles. I don’t like mysteries.”

“C’mon—*shit!*—ever’body on dis whole wily street’s a puzzle t’me.”

“I said, I *hate* puzzles.”

“D’ya hate peoples, too? Never mind! I don’t wanna know from nothin’—an’ I gots t’eat. Da more we yap da more I starve. I ain’t even culled t’morrow’s breakfast yet. So I’ll tell ya what. I’ll throw out m’pride, an’ m’good business sense, an’ give ya da whole mackdaddy-yo fer three fives. Fifteen bucks! Ain’t dat da deal a’da everlovin’ cent’ry er’what?”

“Uhhmmmmmmmmmm—”

“C’mon, lady.”

“—it’s still jacked up.”

“My ol’ lady’s jacked up on crank, an’ I got six kids an’ m’own belly t’feed. Hell, I even gots a hungry dog, too.”

“I wasn’t born to feed your freakin’ house pets—and put your old lady in rehab, why don’t ya?”

The street vendor’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah, right. I see. I sees it jus’ fine. Maybe you *wasn’t* born t’feed my freakin’ house pets, but you sho’re standin’ here alive t’feed your own mis’ry. An’ ain’t dat some jacked up shit.”

Amanda glared.

The street vendor grinned. “Yup, it’s da God’s honest *jacked up* truth, sho’nuff. An’ da God’s honest truth’s about nothin’ but all da pain behind all dem lies. Ya can’t deny it, I know it. An’ all dem lies ya tell your own self, ev’ry damn day, all dey do is keep yo’ pretty li’l ol’, tiny ol’ brain outta da drain.”

“Shut up.”

“Cuz nobody’s sane down a drain. No . . . body. An’ I mean nobody!”

“I said, shut! Up!”

The street vendor opened his filthy, money-grubbing palm. Amanda winced. She could see his lifeline shooting off to Jupiter, then swirling infinitely inward and infinitely back on itself, twisting the print of his flesh as if branded by some merciless hell within.

“Three fives,” he hissed. “Jus’ fifteen li’l ol’ bucks.”

Amanda stared at the stinking, know-it-all vendor. Could smell his cloying, chilling, silly excuse for human breath. And for an endless moment everything seemed frozen in time—Elm street, the passers by, the vendor’s god-awful gold-toothed grin.

Yes, everything, thought Amanda, tears swelling in her eyes. *Why can't everything just wash away? Why?*

But then, as if pricked from a coma, she blinked back her tears, swallowed her memories and ate every last one of her lost hopes. *Never ends,* she thought. *Never.*

“Here,” she sputtered, fighting with her purse. “Here’s your lousy fifteen *li’l ol’* bucks.” She fisted cold bills from within the dark confines of her bag. “Take your rugrats to McDonalds and kiss your jacked up wife good-bye, and just give me the stupid earring.”

PART ONE
I HATE
A MYSTERY

They gave him plenty of food, yet for all they could do he never grew bigger, but kept just the same size as he had been when he was born. Still, his eyes were sharp and sparkling, and he soon showed himself to be a clever little fellow, who always knew well what he was about.

—*Tom Thumb*
The Brothers Grimm

CHAPTER 1

Amanda Margaret Zimmerman studied her uneven reflection in the restroom mirror of her favorite Deep Ellum restaurant, the Cardboard Café. The looking glass hung artistically askew above the sallow porcelain sink, where rust stains had begun to streak in line with the water-flow from the twin pewter faucets. Her fiery green eyes shifted to the right, then the left, then back again, occasionally lingering on the unfinished masonry of the wall the mirror hung from. It was dilapidated, the mirror and the wall. And so were the rest of the walls: all unfinished masonry. The floor was a textured gray concrete.

Amanda didn't like this room. Not one little bit.

She watched her thumb as she rubbed it across the tips of her fingers. Her nails were cut short and neatly manicured—no long claws for her; they only ended up chipped and broken off and then there was another mess to fix. Again she looked at the mirror and the wall. But mostly the wall. She still didn't like it. Made her wonder why she gave a damn about anything. Especially why she suddenly cared so much about this public toilet. She had been in it a zillion times before, but tonight she felt as if she was seeing it for the first time. And it was grotesque. She sensed the mortar leaching out at her from between the dirty, chipped bricks.

Oozing, she thought bitterly, her forehead wrinkling, like milky vomit from a baby's mouth.

She couldn't help but recall how she despised watching her younger sister burp Charlie, her newest nephew.

"Why in God's name have another kid?" she had asked when Sara became pregnant for the fourth time. *"Why create another loose end to be tied up?"*

The little squirt was cute, sure, but his regurgitation was not.

And how many times had Sara delayed and delayed the wiping of little Charlie's oozing lips until the sour gruel had rolled down his chin and soiled the clean diaper his mother had just thrown over her shoulder? It didn't make any sense. Nor did it make any sense as to why the masons hadn't scraped this cauliflower mortar from these vomiting walls.

Why leave a job undone?

"Laziness," Amanda whispered the answer to her own question. "Goddamned sloth."

She shook her head, wishing to Christ her beleaguering thoughts would fall away. They weren't usually this intense and rarely attacked all at once. Of course why would Christ or the Father—or the Holy Ghost, for that matter—help her anyway? She had been painfully aware for a long time now, that there wasn't one single branch of the Divine Trinity that wasn't perpetually too busy or just too damn apathetic to come to her aid. She would simply have to help herself. As usual.

"It's a good thing you're a long time outta the bottle, sweetie," she said under her breath. "Or you'd be a long time bye-bye."

But, she reconsidered, maybe that wouldn't be so bad.

Death.

No, she hated death worse than acid rain, vivisection, collateral damage, and old drunks pissing in the street put together. Death was another consequence of God's sloth, as far as Amanda was concerned. Everyone—everything—lived purely to die. And that wasn't even the worst of it. Putting the Creator aside (and His entire seraphic retinue), a monstrous portion of the misery in life was caused by plain, ordinary people actually trying to make living as painful for everyone else as they felt it was for themselves.

"Have you done that?" Amanda asked her warped mirror image. "Have you screwed-over another human being 'cause you're pissed at the way the world has turned out?"

"Yup." She grit her teeth. "You probably have without even realizing it. Human fucking nature."

She slapped her cheeks, administering a little self-punishment, then drew her fingers back over her ears.

Ears?

The earring!

That's why she had come in here.

Frantically, she rummaged through her carpetbag of a purse: lipstick (bright red and almost gone), two pens, five pencils (broken into different sizes, one left long for self-defense), plenty of erasers, a small sketch pad, old gum, new gum, cigarettes (which she had given up six months ago, but still carried just in case she suddenly had to have a ten minute vacation), hair brush, hair pick, paper clips, Kleenex, et cetera, et cetera, lint and dust.

"Damn it!" she barked. *Where is it?*

She remembered—

Side pocket!

Anxiously, her fingers fumbled with the pocket zipper, then opened it with one merciless yank and penetrated.

Hope you're not lost, you cost me fifteen bucks ya little piece a'shit.

Ahhh . . . there it was.

With renewed calm she freed the wireball and held it up for a damage check. The harsh yet dingy light of the restroom's bare bulb, dangling on its black cord from the high ceiling, disfavored the earring immediately. Amanda glanced at her twenty-nine year old face in the mirror and believed the earring wasn't the only thing the illumination disfavored tonight. Her eyes fell back onto the wireball.

Amanda dear, you're a sucker for too many street vendors.

But that was silly—her soft heart may have been an excuse in the past, but not tonight. Tonight she had really wanted the thing and probably would have paid more for it if the seller hadn't gone down so quickly.

What makes you so special? she wondered at the earring.

It wasn't that it went perfectly with any particular outfit she owned or was intent on buying soon.

So why the big deal?

She bought stuff on the streets practically every week, and this earring was just another piece of junk to add to the rest of the junk she had acquired. Right?

Maybe not.

There was something different about it, besides her compulsive desire to own it. It was strange, more unnatural than the trinkets she usually picked up. It was duller . . . yet more alive. It was nostalgic yet far more modern. It was in some way eternal, infinite, and yet completely an end in itself: a juxtaposition she could hang from her earlobe. This paradox alone made her stomach sizzle until she wanted to choke or throw up.

Or simply scrutinize the damn earring closer.

Cautiously, she probed it with her fingers, then let it go. The small globe spun easily on its tiny brass-colored pivot, which in turn was attached to a short length of grungy chain.

The earring flashed.

Amanda blinked, and her heart jumped in her chest.

A moment later a youthful smile crept across her face. She set the earring spinning once more—this time igniting a random series of three flashes—then grabbed the crazy globe, freezing it in orbit. She brought it closer to her eyes, so close its reflection filled her entire pupil. Very slowly she twisted the ball back and forth, angling it more into the light.

There!

Another spark.

She tried to make it come to life again and was equally successful. A smaller flash and then a fatter one popped out at her. She began to understand why.

Each wire (or metallic thread) that composed the earring was very tightly woven into odd patterns. Some seemed to spiral infinitely in upon themselves, while others were linear, curved, square, rectangular, or triangular. She had recognized these designs out on the street even before the price had been set, but she had thought they were only painted on in some clever though now faded fashion. That just wasn't the case. What she had previously believed to be rust spots were actually very tiny, dense, abstract shapes that contributed to the structure of the larger more recognizable shapes. Unquestionably, this piece of jewelry was the

product of some serious craftsmanship. Some very unique—*jacked up*, she thought—craftsmanship.

What created the illusion of print, however, was the way the light struck the surface. The shapes portrayed by the wires seemed to manipulate the light, bending it, or absorbing it, and creating shadows in the process. These shadows, or dark places, accented whatever the wires' shape in that particular area—circle, square, rectangle, abstract, or any combination. As the earring was turned and the surface changed, other patterns became visible, too. If angled properly, patterns could be seen within patterns. The way the available light fell upon the earring directly influenced what shapes and designs were visible to Amanda's eye.

Enthralled by her discovery she slowly rotated the earring again, continually altering its position in relation to the restroom's single bulb. To her expectations—and thrill—the surface of the globe never looked quite the same way twice. Sometimes there were no visible shapes at all, as if the wires had suddenly disappeared and the surface had become smooth and dull. Or completely black.

Freakin' bizarre.

Truly captivating.

Another spark!

She reversed the earring's course, her tedious scrutiny proving these flashes were not originating from the surface wires, but from below them. It seemed impossible, since the weave was so tight.

But it's true.

She worked the ball until it created another flash and then eased it back, holding the spark as a steady beam, lighting a pinhole-size area of skin just above her left eyebrow.

I can almost see down inside, she thought.

Her eyes strained to bring the wires below the surface filigree into focus. Revelation was just in reach, she knew it. It was like waiting for the first beat of a fetal heart . . .

Or a newborn's first breath.

"Abhh!" she suddenly blurted. "To hell with this bullshit!"

Petulance got the best of Amanda and she gave up, frustrated.

Panting, she scowled, furious with herself, although the desire to understand the earring continued to gnaw at her.

Why the fuck does it matter how this silly thing does what it does?

She didn't like mysteries.

"I don't like puzzles!"

She liked solid facts and solid explanations, and that was all. This bauble offered neither.

Her stomach gurgled.

Does everything have to be so complex and so goddamn enigmatic?

Holding up the earring before her eyes, she glared at it.

"I'm just a little uptight tonight," she whispered. "So I don't need any trouble, okay? Ya got that? I don't want to understand you. That's for the artist who made you and some brainless critic. Not me."

The earring didn't argue. Didn't even spark or flash.

Good.

Amanda exhaled slowly, counting down from ten to one. With trembling hands, she held her hair back and jabbed the earring's hook through the pierce-hole in her right ear, then let the wireworld dangle free. It bounced gently against her neck, a bit heavy, but not uncomfortably so.

Abruptly her attention was drawn by a far off squall. She glanced to her left and right. There it was again. Sounded like a cat. Or cats fighting. No, children screaming.

Shit! Now I'm hearing things.

Taking a step toward the restroom door she heard the strange, garbled cries again.

"Street punks," she muttered.

Hurrying back to the mirror she poked her fingers into her kinky black mop as if she was hoping to penetrate her skull and perform a self-lobotomy. Primping the part on the left side of her head, she roughly laid the shoulder-length strands back in place, then shook her head to appropriately disorganize everything again.

There, that's better.

Next came a little lipstick: red.

That's better, too—although drawing it on was a bit of a trick; her trembling had become shaking.

I gotta get outta here.

She started for the door, but before she had even taken one step her wild eyes locked onto the mirror's reflection of the earring peeking out from beneath her hair. It spun on its pivot—one spark!—and an urge to flush it down the toilet engulfed her. As she reached for the wire demon, however, the emotions faded away as abruptly as they had come, replaced by uncontrollable nausea. Whirling on the commode she lifted the lid and gagged hard.

Nothing came up but caustic fumes. Cold sweat broke out on her face, under her arms, and in between her legs as she waited, eyes closed, for the dyspepsia to erupt again. It didn't.

Why is this happening?

She spit sourly and flushed the toilet. The swirl and gargle of the water made her spine itch, but then it, too, was all gone as the toilet swallowed hard and released her.

Grabbing her purse off the brick ledge by the sink, she jumped at the door and unlatched it (flubbing the first attempt—*Fuck!*), then hurried out into the dining room of the Cardboard Café.

Out into the end of her world, and her sanity, as she knew it.

CHAPTER 2

“**W**ha-what . . . d-do you think?”

“What I think,” whispered the second man huddled a few feet from the first, his face hidden in shadows, “is that I can’t help ya if ya don’t tell me what’s really goin’ on.”

“No. No! NO!” The pained-man’s hand sliced the air, sending drops of sweat flying from his fingertips. The perspiration splattered the grimy concrete floor and then the black liquid, which stood in a tiny stream—a dead stream—three feet to his left.

“Don’t be,” the pained-man continued, “such a . . .” he winced, “such a goddamn smarta—” His words contracted into guttural wheezes. “Goddamnit, ya know what I mean. My . . . legs!”

The pained-man suffered another bite of agony emanating from the gristly flesh below his blackened kneecaps.

The second man, the bearded-man, grimaced sympathetically. *Thank God for the darkness*, he thought.

The single candle flickering twenty feet up the passage did little to illuminate the pained-man’s ragged stumps. Suffering—his own or anyone else’s—was something the bearded-man had never much cared for. It made him feel guiltier than he already did.

But how can I be responsible for any a’this?

Until a week ago, he hadn’t even seen the pained-man in well over a year. Now, however, his own body was aching with compunction for him.

It isn’t right.

Sitting on his haunches and leaning back against the wall, the bearded-man let his tired eyes fall onto the pained-man, finally answering his question about his legs.

“I think ya need t’see a doctor.”

“No fuckin’ shit. I already told ya . . . I told ya, goddamnit!” He shivered and sobbed. “I can’t leave here . . . not yet. And . . . no one can come here. You know that!”

“All I know,” barked the bearded-man, “is you’re damn lucky gangrene hasn’t set in.”

“Bullshit! How many times do I have t’tell ya . . . the stumps were cauterized and medi . . . medicated before I came back into the country.” He paused, his body distorted with another bolt of pain that burned through his bones, like ice-cold acid. “I need more . . . bandages.” He looked directly at the bearded-man. “I need *your* help.”

The bearded-man swallowed, but said nothing.

“I gotta get some painkiller. Can . . . can y-you get it for me?”

“I don’t know,” the bearded-man’s voice was breathy and distant. “I don’t know what ya need.”

“Anything!” snapped the pained-man. “Just get me any fuckin’ thing ya can. Strong! It’s gotta be strong. This is killin’ me, for *chrisakes!*”

The bearded-man clamped his eyes shut and wished to God he could do the same for his mind.

“I still don’t know what ya need,” he said.

“Do I have t’spell it out for ya, *old man?*”

The bearded-man cringed. He tried to remember this was a human being in excruciating pain; he tried to believe that this was a good mind disfigured by torture suffered for too long a time.

“Get some heroin,” sputtered the pained-man. “Or morphine. Steal it if ya have to. I’ll die if ya don’t.”

The bearded-man turned away and stared into the cold darkness filling the tunnel to his left. He tried to push out the chokes and groans of the pained-man.

My friend—had been one of his best, one of his best students, too.

“Alright,” he said at last. “I’ll bring what ya need in a few hours. When I bring more food and water.”

Standing abruptly, he hurried to make his exit, but the pained-man spoke, stopping him.

“Remember . . . tell no one,” he hissed between clenched teeth dripping saliva. “Tell no one I’m even alive. Or he’ll come. He’ll find me with his goddamn ear t’ear grin and his stinkin’ pipes . . . find me too soon. And ya don’t wanna let that happen, trust me. Ya don’t! Cause if he finds me . . . he’ll find *you*. Then we’ll all go down the fuckin’ tubes together. D’ya understand me?”

Without replying or looking back, the bearded-man walked on and disappeared into the darkness, as yet unaware that what remained of his life had been changed forever.

CHAPTER 3

I s everybody fuckin' deaf and blind?

Falling forward, Amanda put her face in her hands and tried to breathe easier. Her forehead and cheeks were wet with sweat again.

“Amy, get off your goddamn soapbox,” she muttered to herself. “You already PMSed this month, so come off it. You’re gonna make yourself sick.”

Another scream!

It was like the ones she had heard earlier in the Cardboard Café’s restroom, the ones she had tried to cast off as howling street punks. Now she was hearing them in the main dining room as well, although no one else in the restaurant seemed to. Her favorite veggie meal of tofu tacos had done little to calm her nerves or her stomach.

The screams continued, growing stronger, spiraling and gurgling like demons down a drain. Amanda glanced right, then left, then back out the Café’s huge front window at the passing throng on Elm Street. She waited for any sign of response. Two death-rock lesbians (flanked by suited yuppies, dreadlocked bohemians, and beer-bellied cowboys) strolled by and wagged their tongues at her, but that wasn’t the kind of attention she was hoping for. She looked away and down at the tabletop and her ravaged plate.

Again the screams. A little closer and more brutal.

“I love . . . your earrings.”

Amanda jumped with a start, a tiny cry squeaking somewhere in the hollows of her throat. It was a man’s raspy voice, close to her ear, that had scared her this time. She could still feel the lick of his sticky breath.

“I . . . am sorry,” he spoke again. “I didn’t mean to startle . . . you.”

You’re lying, thought Amanda—his inflection was one of forced politeness. She felt as if she was having an allergic reaction to it; she felt as if she had suddenly sat on an icicle.

“Really,” whispered the man (again the false sincerity, again the icicle-allergy pushed deeper into Amanda’s bowel). “Please . . . forgive me.”

Amanda tried to clear her throat by coughing into her hands, but all of her attention was focused on the stranger’s odd build. His body seemed skeletal in places although robust in others. His wardrobe, however, *was* deceiving: a baggy suit of trousers with jacket, sadly unkempt, as if it had been soaked in a dirty river and then laid on the bank to dry in the sun. And like river mud, every inch of the fabric was a dull depthless black.

In contrast, the rumpled shirt beneath the buttoned jacket was white—although its texture was also thick, rough, and heavy—the jacket lapels framing it in a V of blackness. Ascending vertically within the center of that V was a row of ivory snaps long ago turned flaxen. At the peak of these snaps, poised between the collar tips (two crinkled triangles poking out and down over the jacket lapels, like the tired prongs of an overworked pitchfork) was a single black stud, convex and circled in cold pewter that once had shined silver. Amanda’s eyes were drawn into the blank eternity of that ebony dot, as if it was a tiny window behind which lay this man’s soul. A lightless soul, perfect in its darkness and antipathy. Infinite in its absurd mystery.

Like God, she thought.

“I . . . I . . . I’m sorry,” she mumbled, but her thin voice quickly dwindled as the black stud wavered before her and dropped away, only to be replaced by something far worse than the endless darkness. His head. It was too big for his body, looking like an airless basketball with one side kicked in. Besides his mouth and large puggish nose, only his high angular cheekbones protruded from the flat face, making more apparent the gray craters where his eyes nested. He blinked slowly and Amanda saw that the flesh

of his lids was thin, bordering on transparent, the lenses of his eyes pooching out the eyelids from beneath.

He can see me through the skin, she thought.

As if to confirm this, the icicle in her bowel drove up into her stomach, turning the acids to slush.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized for the second time, her voice working of its own accord. “Um . . . it’s just that I don’t usually stare—”

What the fuck? I don’t need to explain myself.

“—just too compassionate. I just can’t understand why God would ever do that to anyone . . . deform them . . . so cruel—”

Shut up!

“—there’s just no excuse. Laziness, Creator’s-sloth, that’s all there is to it. No reason for it, for God to make someone so grotesque. I hate Him for that. I hate Him!”

Her blabbermouth suddenly quit and her heart curdled in her chest. As if she was about to cry, her forehead wrinkled.

The man though, was smiling. Or grinning, rather, as if enjoying her faux pas after faux pas. At the center his mouth grew out from his face, creating a small hill, as if he was intentionally pushing his tongue against his lips—lips that were stretched thin and purple-red. Literally, they went from ear to ear, pulling tight the pallid flesh covering his cheeks, and making apparent the form of his gums and the ragged rows of teeth beneath.

“Would you care to sit down?” Amanda suddenly offered. *What are you saying? Get rid of him!*

“No, no,” he spoke with the same distant thunder and in the same oddly broken sentences. “Maybe another . . . time. Thank you for the offer . . . Ms. Zimmerman.”

“How do you know my name?” Her words came with bludgeoning force—she was panicking now. “How?”

The man raised his hand in apology, but again she believed his sincerity false.

“Please . . . excuse me for . . . prying,” he said, pointing at something on the table. “It was just that I . . .”

Amanda followed his arm down to the tip of his finger, and then to the place on the table that finger designated. It was her wallet he was pointing at and it was lying wide open, the rubber strap unsnapped. Her driver's license—*My name and address!*—was exposed, easily readable through the clear plastic window that protected it. Grabbing up the wallet Amanda pressed it to her chest and tried to think:

I didn't take it outta my purse, did I? No! No way! The waiter hasn't even brought the bill yet.

To check herself, she hurriedly scanned the tabletop for the missing ticket. It wasn't there. Not under her plate or glass or even propped up between the salt and pepper and ketchup and mustard. There wasn't any sign of that little plastic tray they always brought the checks on either, so it couldn't have been delivered and then blown off the table. Those trays had clips molded into the plastic that held the ticket down—*Yes, yes they did!*

(The spiraling screams began again.)

Amanda envisioned the nightly news and the countless stories of rape that went with it. How many women had been mercilessly beaten and screwed in their own homes, just because they made some damn dumb mistake, like leaving their wallet spread open on a public table where anybody walking by could see?

But you didn't leave it open, she protested. You didn't even get it out of your bag.

With her heart pounding, she slid her leg to the left of her chair and found her purse exactly where she had left it. Even so, she could taste the hook, worm, and sinker in her mouth.

You're goin' down, her brain taunted. And all because you fucked up and don't even know it. You're freakin' tonight. You're suicide!

Dropping the wallet in her purse, she lifted the bag and put it in her lap, her hands pressing it securely against her thighs. *I don't even have my check yet, she thought once more.*

The stranger again turned on his charming graveside manner. "Please . . . forgive me . . . my boldness."

Amanda shivered.

"I didn't mean . . . to frighten you . . ."

You're lying! You're lying! You're lying!

"I . . . only wanted to compliment you . . . on your choice of earrings."

Earrings?

"You see . . . I admired them . . . and thought . . ." His grin turned up at the ends. "Well . . . I just felt it would be nice . . . to let you know."

Earrings? Amanda thought again. Plural? Two?

"They are . . . quite . . . lovely," he continued.

Amanda calculated furiously: *The vendor said the artist only made one. That's all there was. That's all I bought—I wanted a set, nice and neat and matched—but there was only one. Just one!*

"They're so . . . so . . . how should I say it? Ah . . . yes," his S hissed. "*Puzzling.*"

I don't like puzzles! Amanda nearly screamed.

"They are very . . . interesting. So mysterious."

I hate mysteries!

"So torpid . . . yet so alive."

"Th-th-thank you," she unwittingly sputtered, her hand reaching for her runaway mouth but never touching it. Instead, she fondled the wireball hanging from her right ear.

That's the one I bought. The only one.

She moved her hand to her left—naked—earlobe, but it wasn't naked anymore.

Her fingers struck something. Something that twirled and sparkled. She caught a reflection of it in the front window next to her, the surprise sending her hand away like a shot and back into her lap. She could feel the thing spinning lightly and grating off her neck.

It's impossible!

Yet there was another earring there, identical to the first.

Amanda attempted to smile at the deformed creature—she was thinking of him less and less as a man—but her lips went dead, hanging from her face like those on a rubber mask. She didn't know what to say or do, although jumping through the large plate glass window at her left wasn't out of the question. Anything to get away.

But he already knows my name and where I live!

"I . . . always notice . . . a pretty lady," said the creature, his voice more breath than tone. "And . . . her jewelry."

Amanda felt the earrings—both of them—gently twirl at his mention of the word jewelry. Their motion knotted her nerves and her hands into fists. Her top teeth dug into her bottom lip.

"I find," he continued, "that a woman's jewelry . . . can change a woman's life. Don't . . . you think?"

Amanda let her eyes close completely.

"No need to answer, dear, I can see . . . that you agree. Ah . . . yes . . . they are so very . . . lovely. Indeed, I love a pretty woman . . . with pretty . . . pretty . . . jewelry. Such jewelry will take you places . . . in this world."

Then why doesn't it take me the hell outta here?

She could smell the creature's stinking breath falling on her, making her whole face hot, except for her nose, which felt like the tip of an iceberg. Or was it the tip of that icicle pushing its way up through her digestive tract and finally boring into her sinuses? Either way, she was sweating like a pig.

I can't stand this anymore!

She looked up from her lap, suddenly realizing the freak's eyes were not identical. In fact they were blatantly mismatched, not only in size but in color. The smaller orb was bloodshot and a radiant blue, while the right eyeball was swollen, its iris a deep golden brown set against a yellowed white. The only similar feature between the two was the pupil, each as black and depthless as the stud at the neck of his shirt—all three together made up an unholy trinity: a triangle that would have put the one in Bermuda to shame.

Anything could be lost in there, realized Amanda. *Anything. Including my own soul.*

A possibility overtook her: maybe these windows into his being weren't windows at all, but mirrors. Mirrors that reflected the darkness of her own spirit. The pent up anger. The emptiness. The Godlessness.

Like a jack out of a box, the creature's right hand jumped out at her. "May . . . I bid you . . . farewell?" he asked, offering a friendly shake.

I don't wanna shake your hand, she agonized—she didn't even want to look at him. Just do it and he'll leave! Kiss his goddamn ass if that's what it takes. But do it fast. Do it now!

Before she could argue, her right hand was rising from her lap to meet his.

They interlocked.

They gently shook.

And instantly the icicle within her exploded into hot water, causing her to look down at last and see the hand she was holding.

A woman's hand!

The flesh covering the slender fingers was albino with a hint of gray, the long fingernails yellowed, and the palm soft and broiling against hers. Glancing at his other hand, she saw it was also pallid hinting gray, but was unquestionably of the proper sex. The fingers were short and sturdy, the veins that stood up beneath the flesh implied a man's strength.

She looked back at the female appendage as it slipped from hers with a slurping sound akin to rotten wood pulled up from wet earth; the smell that escaped was dank and sour like old semen. It made her want to hurl bloody hellcakes, but she was only able to shake her head slowly and stare into the creature's face, his permanent grin punctuated by mismatched ears: the right one the size and texture of a toddler's; the left one overgrown and wrinkled, the canal leading to the eardrum clogged with a scraggly tuft of white and gray hair. Hair that did not match the top of his head, where the strands were a 14 karat gold, greasy, and tightly combed back from his wide forehead.

Without another word he turned from Amanda and proceeded to hobble off. Although his baggy suit pants hid his legs, it was obvious they were incongruous as well. The right limb was much fatter than the one on his left, which was also longer, causing his hips to gyrate beneath the tail of his coat. Overall he looked like a badly assembled puzzle, the wrong pieces forced together.

"I hate puzzles," Amanda grunted.

And retched her favorite veggie dinner back onto its plate.