

before



a
novel

j. kilburn

Writer J. Kilburn brings readers a light - hearted and whimsical coming of age story that follows the adventures and misadventures of Just Regular Kids as they grow up in a pastoral and peaceful New England college town. Buckle your seatbelts- all may not be as it seems. Events in a far-away criminal underworld lurk in the background as these teenagers take their first steps into adulthood.

before

by

J. Kilburn

Adventurous readers will discover that two Sweet-Sixteens have a lot more in common with hardened criminals than you - or they - might realize...

Surprises are in store for everyone!



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a novel



Crime and Coming-of-Age Fiction
for Adventurous Readers

by
J. Kilburn

Sometimes the line between Sweet Sixteen
and Hardened Criminal is uncomfortably
hard to discern....

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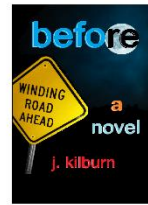


**This Girl
is about
to become
a father.**

**Wait...
What?!**

**Brittany Wendell's
coming-of-age story has
a few twists and turns.**

COMING IN MAY



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A NOVEL TWIST...

Kilburn takes your average teenagers, gives them a Noir edge, and then plausibly and seamlessly drops them into international crime fiction in this intriguing and entertaining novel. These teenagers go about their sweet and sordid adventures blissfully unaware of their role in larger and more complicated regional events. *BEFORE*, a Novel is a Coming-of-Age story, but it's also a story about international Organized Crime and the role that small-town folks, your neighbors, your Loved Ones, and even the Honors Students next door might play in that dark and dangerous world.



A
READERS FAVORITE
5-STAR
SELECTION!



"Kilburn breathes life into (the characters) with some hilariously awkward scenes.... The dialogue is... probably among the top one percent in its sarcasm and authenticity.... I have no doubt others who read this novel will find themselves both amused and bewildered in the best possible way."

- Jamie Michele for READERS FAVORITE, 5-star review, Jan 2022

WHAT READERS HAVE SAID about writer J. Kilburn's previous work:

HEAVEN'S DOOR, a Novel

"A six-hour reading marathon - I couldn't put it down!" - P.S.

"*Heaven's Door* by J. Kilburn comes in swinging and rarely stops." - Self-Publishing Review

"*Heaven's Door* is a heart-stopping tale of good versus evil." - InD'tale Magazine

"Wild storytelling is part of this novel's raucous, dangerous power." - Self-Publishing Review

"The world here is rich and full of compelling characters, but I can't help but feel like we skimmed over the top of too many of them." - Independent Book Review

Readers wanted to know more about the characters from

Heaven's Door, a Novel... well, here they are!



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***BEFORE, a Novel* by J. Kilburn**
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THE VIEWS AND OPINIONS EXPRESSED

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the Indie author/publisher retains full control of this work
contact the author/publisher at jkilburn@cerealnovel.com



This tale contains violence, romance, nudity, sex, drugs, tobacco and alcohol use, and lots of other ill-advised or maladaptive behavior. There is no Rock-'n-Roll.

AUTHOR'S RESPONSE TO THE CONTENT WARNING:

There is some cussin' and some fight'n and more than a little ethically-questionable behavior in these pages. I found it best to keep the vernacular and activities of my young characters authentic. I hope you will find them likeable... in spite of their mis-steps.

Concerned about teen substance abuse, domestic violence, or risk-taking behavior?

Visit www.topdogsnoel.com/resources to find links to helpful community organizations.

ILLUSTRATIONS

I am once again indebted to Ardelia Huntress for sharing her artistic talents and literary criticisms. She makes my little world complete.

COVER ART

Cover design by James K. Mossman III

Thanks to SmartSign LLC for manufacturing the custom road sign, as well as for permission to reproduce a photograph on the book cover. SmartSign can meet all your custom sign needs!

Thanks to Robert Karkowski / Pixabay for the full moon image. Pixabay is a Royalty-Free image sharing website.

MUSIC

Music referenced in this book includes:

"Baby It's Cold Outside" written by Frank Loesser (1944) - Frank Music Corp. / MGM

"Constant Craving" written by K.D. Lang and Ben Mink (1992), performed by K.D. Lang on the her album Ingenue / Sire Records

"Careless Whisper" written by George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley (1984), performed by George Michael and the group WHAM! on the album Make It Big / Columbia Records



Many heroes inspired this tale...

We tend to think in terms of charging into burning buildings or battling foreign enemies, but sometimes the things Heroes are made of, and from, are smaller and more mundane - yet still brave, profound, and self-sacrificing. My first book was inspired by someone who lost his life for Doing The Right Thing. This second book is a story about someone who kept a secret and gained a life. The world is better for it.



He saw her for the first time up at Hattie Wendell's place.

But so much happened before that moment... and after.

CHAPTER ONE

Beginnings...

There's this deep and dark ravine just up out of Collegeville, on the Mill Village end of town, and that's the place where they found all that money.

Just this side of the abandoned bridge at the bottom of that tiny valley there's a little gravel cul-de-sac created by drivers swinging the car wide as they turn around to leave the dead-end where the road now stops. Nobody ever goes up there anymore, except to fish, or maybe to park and fornicate. But back in the late 'Eighties everyone passed through there - that gravel spot was smack-dab on a busy road between town and the Outside World. In those days it was just a little pull-off to one side of the old state route that snaked up through that ravine to the new Interstate Highway. Used by snowplows, postal route drivers and school busses turning around to go back town, it was wide and wheel-worn. If a driver backed up too far, they'd end up in the hole that was once the basement of a stately gothic carriage barn... someone did, once, before the trees grew up enough to prevent it. It's all still up there, right past the empty, broken-windowed, falling-down mansion and its little orchard of gone-wild apple trees, the whole of it gradually disappearing into encroaching forest.

In 1991, during the old state road's last year in that wet gully, some folks from Mill Village were driving through there on the way to the interstate one warm and sunny late-fall day, when suddenly there was this drifting CLOUD of greenbacks on the road... like they were driving through a pile of fallen leaves! They looked back and all these dollars were swirling in the air behind the car, spiraling into two vortexes on either side, then dropping and scattering just like the foliage. They probably wouldn't have noticed but for the fact that fallen leaves aren't uniform rectangles, green on one side and grey on the

other and covered with faces of dead presidents. Well of course they stopped, right at that very gravel pull-off, parked the big old Pontiac Lemans wagon with the hazards on, and bailed out to start chasing bills just as fast as they could go. They paused to count now and again, as their hands filled up.

"Oh, Wow! They aren't all ones, either!"

"Yup, I've got three hundred already! Here's a bunch more, look in that ditch over there...."

So they picked up a couple thousand dollars, just like that.

There's probably some of that money, still unfound, rotting in the leaf-litter up there to this very day.

But back to those town folks: they turned around and took the money they'd picked up down to the police department. The cops working that day were absolutely delighted to take the money off their hands. They told those good citizens that some guy over in Stone City had reported losing his wallet off the roof of his car somewhere on that very road, just yesterday. Ya, I bet. Those folks from Mill Village were law-and-order types and didn't dream of asking for a finder's fee, or how the hell that much money fit into a wallet. It wouldn't have. A paper shopping-bag, maybe.

Those folks were just part of the history in that ravine, a sum of events both long past and recent. Some of this history would be germane to a certain young man from Ontario in his unknown and not-too-very-distant future, in ways that you or I or he could not even have imagined. And you'll see that money again here and there in this tale and others - you can count on it.

As much as the Interstate Highway up there at the top of the hill was a step forward in time, the old soon-to-be-abandoned state road was a step back: this ravine had welcomed travelers to town since the days of the Concord Coach. In the old days - the really old days - the roads had gone from Quebec City to Boston over the tops of the ridges. There was an inn up there, back in 1800, not too far from where the superhighway exit is now - funny how the main road is right back on top of the ridges, two hundred years later. Two centuries back, travelers to town would get dropped at the inn by a stagecoach. Once fortified by a night's sleep they would hire a local team to bring them down through that ravine in a four mile trip to the bustling little mill town just getting started at the river below. The little pike never got wider or straighter when first the Model A, then the Model T, then the Edsel and the Mercury took over. Instead, it just got gravel and then stone and then blacktop in ever deeper layers that couldn't hide the sags in the downhill edge as the whole thing moved towards its destiny. When the Interstate superhighway and heavy trucks came, it was the beginning of the end for the little road down to town. You could peer over the guardrail - the old creosoted wooden post and steel cable kind - and see four, eight, ten feet down the layers and layers of asphalt and stone from previous repairs slowly sliding down the clay hillside and towards the brook far below. After they built that new interstate access highway it wasn't five years before the old road - the whole thing, they say - slid one hundred and fifty feet down, in one piece, to the bottom. The few remaining telephone poles with their old blue glass insulators, the wooden guardrails with their many steel cables, and even the signs, they followed the pavement to the bottom too.

That road is sitting there as you read this, on the bottom of the ravine, right next to the brook: a series of long level spots gradually growing a green carpet of thick moss that obscures the now-undisturbed sections of pavement that once welcomed a young man named Bruce Sutton to Collegeville as he embarked on the adventure that would bring him to meet the makers, givers and takers of all that money.

Okay, here goes... "I think I should go to The Academy."

In a kitchen in a suburb of Toronto, Ontario, Canada, a year or two before those folks in the neighboring country were chasing around clouds of loose money, a boy just becoming a young man made a case for where he wanted to spend the next four years of his life. The kitchen could have been any one of tens of thousands of kitchens across North America where this same discussion, or versions of it, were playing out during this time of year. So unremarkable and mundane, this years-ago beginning of great and terrible things....

Just voices, at first, there in that suburban Toronto kitchen: two of them older, but not too old, male and female, and a younger voice that was resonant, earnest, deepening by the day. The words spoken by the teenager idealistic but the mind behind them growing up even as he spoke, coming to resolve and resolution. It could have been your own kitchen, thirty years ago, with its dark cupboard doors, light, bright windows, steel sink and Formica-covered counters with cookie jars, crockery and tinware lining the wall in the back.

The female voice filled the kitchen suddenly, with a strident, urgent, demanding question: "Where?!?" Bruce's mother stared at him, open-mouthed, her finger motionless in the air, pointing at his father and her husband to emphasize some now-forgotten point she had been making.

Bruce's father's voice was deep, but softer than his wife's - caught off-guard, almost tentative: "Huh?" The man hung momentarily and uncharacteristically slack-jawed, his expression a mixture of surprise at his son's remark and irritation that was carried over from thirty seconds before.

"The Academy. In Vermont. The States..." Bruce turned to address his mother - *she'll be the Hard Sell...* "They have a great Architecture program, a football team that will make for kind of a nice atmosphere on weekends, and it's in the mountains. I'd like to be someplace different, for a while. Kind of a small-town place. Quaint, white houses and church steeples and all..." He looked back and forth between his parents, an eager smile on his face. "A nice place for you guys to visit, eh?" He rummaged behind his back for a second and brought a pamphlet out of his pocket. "I've got a catalogue right here..."

Bruce Sutton could have been any young nearly-man, but the high-school Senior in this kitchen, on this long-ago late-fall evening, was muscular and tall, easygoing, still just a kid. A boy with the typical hockey-player's mop of even-length, just-below-the-ears and go-everywhere brown hair gathered into unruly and defiant locks that reminded his mother of a garden gone awry.

His mother recovered first. Gloria Sutton looked the glossy brochure in her son's outstretched hand warily, almost in horror. "In the STATES?!? Do they even HAVE a hockey program down there?" She wasn't quite that naïve, but she placed hockey - and her son's place on a team - right up there with straight A's on the report card.

"Yah, Mom, a good one. Top of their league a couple of times recently. Nice rink. Lotta championship banners, eh?"

His father's eyes narrowed as he, too, chimed in to agree with, if not echo, his wife's concerns: "It's kind of a SMALL school, isn't it?"

Bruce knew what his father was getting at. "Ya, about a thousand or so, eh?" He held outstretched hands up, palm out. Wait. "But I'll get to PLAY there. A LOT!"

Wise parents were both talking at once again:

“There won’t be any scholarships for hockey at a school THAT small, will there?” Dad, ever the accountant.

“But I THOUGHT you were going to go to Michigan! Just across the lake, eh?” Mom, the hockey fan and mother who didn’t want her only son too very far away.

Bruce sighed while he waited for them to finish, then pressed his argument: “Look. I could go to Michigan, or McGill, or maybe I could still get into Cornell or Northeastern, and I MIGHT even get a scholarship...”

His mother nodded furiously. Those were large schools with big hockey programs.

Bruce continued: “...But I wouldn’t get to PLAY, not ‘til I’m third year or a Senior.”

His mother's head unconsciously shook in the negative and her mouth started to open....

Bruce ignored her expression and soldiered on: “They’re BIG programs and I’m NOT THAT GOOD.” *I might not even GET a scholarship to one of those teams....* Bruce Sutton did not think in terms of which college he was applying to - he thought in terms of where he would play hockey. *Same difference*, or so he thought.

Gloria Sutton shook her head even more vigorously now, a grim set to her mouth and a crease between her eyes reflecting her inner assumption as well as her belief: *Don't sell yourself short with false modesty, son, it's unbecoming. Best damned hockey player in the family!*

Pete Sutton frowned, considering what he already kind of suspected. He also knew enough not to agree with his son in front of his hockey-mom of a wife.

Bruce continued: “At a smaller school, I’ll be on the ice NEXT YEAR, as a freshman! It’s a small team. I’ll get ice time. At The Academy, they’ll hear about me two, maybe three years in a row.” Here in this household, it went without saying that THEY were the professional hockey scouts. He looked back and forth at his parents.

His father looked grim. “It seems wasteful to throw away the chance at scholarships, Bruce.” *Kid might just get one....* Pete Sutton's hand had wandered, as it habitually did when he was concerned about money, to rest on the lip of his wallet pocket, as if to protect his hard-earned wealth from snatching fingers in a crowd. He was unaware of the habit.

Bruce hid the smile that arose from genuine affection. He knew that his father's concern about money was born of real hardship. The man had reportedly gone to college with one suit and one set of everyday clothes and a bicycle, and then he had earned everything else. Bruce was aware that what he was doing was an affront to the man's sensibilities. *I'll have to tread very carefully to win him over.* “It’s a good program, Dad.” He held out the brochure again. “The people at that school are workers. The students AND the professors. At one of the big schools, I’m not going to see a professor at eight o’clock at night in a study room. They’ll be driving their Mercedes off to some social function or play racquetball as soon as it hits five o’clock, eh? At this school in Vermont, I’m telling you, the DEPARTMENT HEAD is right there with his sleeves rolled up, tutoring students at ten o’clock at night! In the Engineering school, too, full professors hanging out in the office with the DOOR OPEN, no secretary, and kids are WORKING in there, doing their homework IN HIS OFFICE, I’ve SEEN it!” He sealed his argument with a bright, engaging, eye-brows high smile.

His parent’s differences showed, briefly.

His father immediately assumed marketing was at work. “Yes, those videos are slick, and that’s what they want you to think, but that’s why they send them to your high school.” Calm, almost condescending.

His mother frowned. "You've been to VERMONT?!?" Anxiety crept into her voice. "When? When did you go to Vermont, Brucie?"

His mother was right this time, *but why does she have to worry so much?* "DAD, I've BEEN there!"

His mother both nodded - *I knew it* - and shook her head - *Oh, the betrayal* - at the same time. *Won't even tell us when he's off to a foreign country, he's too independent already, this one....*

Bruce caught his breath - *best not to be seen as arguing*. There was a big difference between having a discussion and having a fight. In this house, they only had discussions. He was glad of that right now, and would strive to keep it so. Bruce lowered his voice. "I took a trip with Scott last year... August. That weekend we went to Montreal. It was fine, just a hundred, hundred-fifty miles South... No big deal."

Gloria Sutton certainly seemed to think it was a big deal, alright: "You went to a different COUNTRY and didn't even TELL us you were GOING?" She punctuated her admonishment with an angry scowl.

Whups, eh? Bruce shrugged an eyebrow and tried to look a little meek about it, even though he didn't actually feel that way.

His father's response was more measured: "How long have you been thinking about this?"

Bruce's voice rose a little as he forgot himself in his frustration. He wasn't getting his intended point across. "It was FINE. I'm a citizen in BOTH countries, remember?"

Born in Detroit while visiting Grandma, to one parent who'd emigrated North across the lake and another parent whose people had lived on the North Shore since the days of the Hudson's Bay Company, Bruce Sutton was a citizen of a continent, able to legally migrate North and South the same as the geese. This fact would figure into his future in a very important and unanticipated way some day soon.

He continued: "No sweat at the border. Next year, I'll be living there, on my own." Actually, he'd be in a dormitory with two hundred other young men, and be heavily supervised and mentored, but that was a fine distinction. "It was no big deal to check it out... AND it was a good idea." Bruce looked pointedly at his father. *See, I'm mature, thinking things through, checking them out... capable of making a good decision.* "YES, I know that this will cost a lot of money. NO, it wouldn't be a good idea to go just because I want to play hockey there. BUT, it's a good place for me to make a name for myself on the ice, have fun doing it, and the program there is GOOD, so I'll have something to fall back on if I don't make it on the ice. Hockey might not-"

His mother interrupted: "Oh yes you will!" *Make a successful hockey career? Of course!* "You just need confidence, Honey!"

Bruce waited so that he would not be talking over her. He wanted to be heard. "Look, it's part of the plan, eh? It's a good plan. MY plan. I go to school, play hockey. If I get picked up...."

His mother muttered under her breath, "You will...."

"THEN I'll play pro until I can't anymore and then I'll design stadiums with my fame from the ice to sell me. If I DON'T get picked up...."

Bruce's parents both started to open their mouths....

Bruce shook his head vigorously and turned up his volume a notch: "WHICH IS A POSSIBILITY, THEN I've got a nice comfy skill with which to support me into old age and I'll be able to afford a house and a car and a dog and all that stuff..."

His parents responded nearly in unison:

“We’ll discuss it.”

“We’ll have to talk about it.”

On that most important of things, they were agreed.

Bruce Sutton left the kitchen unmoved and muttering under his breath. *They can "discuss" it all they want.* He smirked. He already knew where he was going to school next year. He’d gotten his Provisional Notice of Early Acceptance in the mail just last week, and had already signed and mailed the check from his summer’s savings account, just to make sure. *I’ll break it to them after they’ve had some time to mull it over....* He smiled. Some kids - pretty good hockey players - went off to college to be in a hockey program. Once there, they practiced a lot and mostly warmed a bench at game time. HE was going off to school to PLAY hockey. *THAT’s worth the six thousand dollars I put up in the last five summers. Mom and Dad will cough up the rest when they see the place!*

Bruce was the only student in his secondary school who had visited all five potential colleges on his list before he’d even started his Senior year. He hadn’t left his parents out of it intentionally; he just knew what needed to be done, so why make a big production out of it?

During his explorations, he saw a lot of soaring brick architecture, a lot of ivy climbing up walls, and a lot of wow-factor amenities meant to impress parents with tight fists around big checkbooks. He also saw a falling-down wooden ice rink, some grand and new and uninspiring cement ones, and one that looked like a community rink. That one, especially, did not inspire thoughts of memories made or of legends born. He quickly crossed off some schools from his list.

At each school he’d called ahead the Thursday before. Said he was a hockey player, looking at schools, and wondered if the Admissions Department could give him directions. He already had those from course catalogues and mailings, of course, but they didn’t need to know that... One admissions counselor gave him directions and then hung up. A couple told him what time to arrive to catch regularly scheduled tours. The Academy was different.

The Academy salesperson on the other end of the phone asked him where he played hockey. Not where he went to high school, even though it amounted to the same thing. She asked about his league, its record. She asked about his coursework. She asked when he thought he might be on campus, and then told him how to get to the rink and how to get to Admissions. She said she would see him Saturday. It was personal, human and genuine.

Bruce’s friend Scott was sponsoring the weekend road-trip with his brand-new driver’s license and car in exchange for the cost of admission for the two of them into the Parc Safari open-air zoo up near Montreal. Scott was hoping to major in engineering or something responsible and lucrative like that, but he also wanted to summer in the wilds of an undiscovered continent where he would sedate large animals for hands-on, close-quarters study. His plans were not as fully-formed as Bruce’s. Scott hoped that there would be some attractive and available female biologist also involved in this same work, sharing a tent with him on the unexplored savanna. Bruce figured his friend’s wide and ever-present smile and rocker-length curly yellow hair would make the female company likely, but he wasn’t sure about an engineering job with annual summer vacations to the lands watched over by Kilimanjaro. Scotty had some things to figure out.

Early on the second day of their road-trip weekend they checked out of the motel and headed east out of Montreal on Bruce's errand. Scott drove them towards the Eastern Townships on the Autoroute, then south on a major Quebec artery. Two hours into their trip they crossed through U.S. Customs into Vermont with little trouble. Bruce had the college brochure with him for the Inquisitors at the Line, but didn't need it. They got waved through after a cursory interrogation and headed South on an "Interstate" multi-lane divided highway.

Scott looked over at Bruce: "Hmmm. Culture shock, eh? The highways are different."

They weren't.

Bruce shrugged. "It's still drive-on-right. Go south on Route Ninety-One. Follow one of these foreigners so you don't get all confused, eh, you being new to driving and all..."

"Maybe someday your parents will let you get a moped, eh?"

"Asshole." Bruce snickered. "Taking Dad's Audi on dates next month..."

"See it when I believe it." Scotty laughed. "AND it's still your DAD'S, not YOURS."

"Asshole." Bruce said it with a smile and looked out the window to reflect on that problem for a bit. His own savings were going into first-year tuition costs, to make his choice -whatever it finally was - more likely to stick with certain opinionated parents. *Got to make it a matter already settled....*

The landscape didn't seem immediately different: farms and cows and fields and woods bordered the highway. The houses here were more bland: white and trimmed in deep green or black instead of the gaudy, fluorescent pinks, bright greens, aquas and harvest golds used on residences in the flatlands to the south and east of Montreal. Mountains appeared. The wide valley and farms of the St. Lawrence River region were behind then for good, apparently. Brick buildings materialized beside the highway, then gas stations and a strip... the outskirts of a New England city, perhaps? The city never appeared. The white frame houses and farms and woods returned, along with a tree-lined ever-wider river that meandered southwards with the highway.

About two hours later Scott stopped the car at the bottom of a long, down-sloping exit ramp, right in front of a stop-sign that marked a narrow, barely two-lane road frugally paved in cracked, sun-bleached macadam. Three official-looking signs scare-crowded from the far edge of the narrow road, but nothing else at all to indicate that this place was somewhere, anywhere:

GAS 5.0 >

THE ACADEMY 4.0 >

MILL VILLAGE 5.0 >

Scott looked left and right. Blacktop disappearing under the throughway bridges to the right, the same road plunging down a hill and disappearing around a forested bend to the left. "You sure about this? Like the middle of NOWHERE, eh?"

Bruce pointed: "It says there's at least ONE gas station, too! Drive, Scotty!"

"You say so... should have named it Middle-Of-Nowhere-Vill." Scotty sighed, grimaced, and shifted the car into drive.

“Let’s just see it. You biologists make judgements on empirical evidence, right? Let’s get some data on this Academy.”

A skeptical Scott turned the car to the right.

They went under the expressway bridges, passed a long-ago farm, and then entered thick forest on a steep side-hill. The car fell down a road designed more for bobsled or luge, with twisting, plunging descents and hard corners. Shortly the pavement tipped into a deep ravine where all daylight seemed to be left behind.

The road the boys were slaloming down would be gone before Bruce even returned to actually attend school. Construction was already starting: equipment was parked here and there along the side of the road, piles of stone and boulders lined both shoulders in a wide spot not too far from the highway interchange, orange signs shouted "WORK ZONE" at regular intervals. By the time Bruce was an Academy Cadet the state had finally re-located the numbered highway off of the collapsing and ever-under-repair side of what was really a very tall stream-bank and instead put it straight over the top of the hill on the other side of the brook.

Some strange things happened in that ravine those boys were falling into, in those few decades after after the Interstate came, but before the road was relocated. Perhaps Scotty felt it as he piloted their descent to town on that sinking road, but he merely assigned his tension to the narrow lanes and bumps and curves and crazy forty-five mile-per-hour posted speed which he couldn’t seem to make half of in the car’s pitching and bucking ride. Bruce didn’t know about any of those things as he and Scott passed over the soon-to-be-abandoned bridge at the bottom of the ravine, but who knows? Maybe he heard about all that cash later. It’s possible... that money was touched by just about everyone who would end up central to his story, though he had yet to meet any of them. For now, he and Scott bounced over that same bridge, passed the gravel pull-off, the orchard, the falling-down mansion, and went on their innocent and merry way, none the wiser about the history of the place other than a brief shiver that tickled the passenger's spine and shoulders.

Bruce put that flicker of chill down to the creepy old apple trees and the forlorn, falling-in mansion that looked straight out of a child's Halloween book.

Scotty pointed at the decaying, once-opulent home as they went by. “Nice. That must be the Academy President’s house...”

The road emerged into daylight on a flat plateau dotted with well-pruned apple trees on one side and Holstein cows on the other. They drove through - yes, literally right down the middle of - a barnyard on this major numbered state highway. Scott had to stop for a cat and a tractor, in that order. They gawked at blue silos that castled over the barn and yard, and then they made a short downhill pitch through someone’s flower garden to a stop-sign in an idyllic little village of less than twenty houses.

“Must be for all the academy staff, eh? All ten of them.” Scotty wagged a finger over the steering wheel.

“Asshole. Go right, eh? College is about two miles down the road.”

They arrived at the Academy campus a couple of hours earlier than Bruce had anticipated. He was relieved to find that it was big and brick and permanent and bordered by a store and gas station complex on one end and a village center on the other. The square, cookie-cutter architecture and paint scheme seemed to dominate around a mown-grass green fenced by granite posts and heavy black chain. One end of the green was right by the road. Bruce found it easy to pick out college-owned property that spilled along the road to the left and right of the end of the fenced lawn by the red and gold paint and the pine-green trim on the buildings. He had Scott drive past the Admissions Office so he could get his bearings and then they went to scope out the town.

Scott had only a passing interest; his college ambitions lay elsewhere at the moment. They ate a late breakfast at a little café on the town green surrounded by brick and wooden storefronts and churches, with a well-kept train station on one end of the block and a wide river bordering the other end. Much to Scotty's surprised indignation, small New England towns seemed to have chain grocery stores, hardware stores, and gas stations just like Canadian towns did.

As they drove past a couple of freshly-painted mansions and many well-kept homes on the way back to campus, Bruce pointed randomly and announced: "Academy President's house... Academy President's OTHER house... President's SUMMER house..."

Scotty admitted defeat. "Ya, yay, yes, eh?" He shrugged, as much as his grip on the steering wheel allowed. "So it's a real hopping place. YES, it looks NICE here. Ya, ya, it's a real college. But do they have hockey, like REAL HOCKEY, eh?" He knew that was the litmus test for his friend.

"Let's go see." Bruce gestured. "Out to the main road, go in on the other end of the campus..."

Hopping place? Yes, then, in Bruce's sixteenth year. Not later, though.

In twenty years the college, the dorms, the bustle of academia, the young minds... nearly all of it would be gone, memorialized only in a few buildings of common architecture here and there converted to apartments, starter-business space, a thrift shop. Bruce would be forever gone from this place, too. He'd be dead in eight years, mourned in nine, and found in eleven. What little remained - bones, threads that the crime lab didn't destroy in testing, a wide-grinned and empty skull missing two teeth - these would be officially interred in their own designated perpetual crypt: a drawer in the walk-in safe in the Evidence Room at the Vermont State Police lab. They have to do that, you know, when they realize that they won't solve a case. The remains still have to be kept, perpetually. In case. The evidence - what little there is of it - must be available for the jury at trial. Murder has no Statute of Limitations.

But so much happened before that. Bruce had not the faintest idea that he would be meeting The Reaper in so short a time, or here, or that before he did, he himself would send two men off to meet Death before him. What a change a few years makes in a young man. Or in his prospects. Could Scotty have stopped him, put an restraining hand on his arm and said, 'Hey, there, slow down a minute, eh?' If he'd known, had any inkling of what lay beyond the mouth of that dark door, would he have told his friend, 'Don't go in there?' Would Bruce have heeded the warning? Suddenly knowing even everything, would Bruce have turned around, foregone his plan and his dreams, and retreated to safe obscurity in some sporting goods store in Toronto? Or would he have at least changed his Academic Advisor, stayed with his original major, stayed on his imagined and planned trajectory? Maybe not, had he known all. Change one thing, change everything. By the end, Bruce Sutton had so much to lose. But he had so much, too.

Those that survive him and remember him know that well.

This trip occurred in the innocent and carefree days before all that.

In the here and now of two boys ready to seize the future, back in those days where the future held only promise, they found the rink, unaware of the doom hanging over the campus and the young man. The rink was across a set of railroad tracks and down on the bottoms by the wide, meandering river. The arena was old. Brick crumbled on one corner, while a battered wooden front double door provided an

impossibly mundane and window-less entrance. The facade seemed uninspiring. A handmade sign had been set into the brick over the double doors:

THE STABLE

painted carefully in black block letters on a small piece of white plywood that had seen better days.

When Bruce tried to open it, this doorway to his near future, it was locked. But not secured quite fast in all dimensions through which we flit - the door handle had an electric effect on the boy-man. Time stopped. He saw a body - a man - fall to the street in front of him, a single whisp of gun-smoke curling up between them. A girl pranced through his vision - a beautiful, wide, smooth, smiling face with full lips and green eyes and a sea of black curls floating around it. He felt the weight of a burbling child on his knee before he saw the top of the boy's head, as they sat on a sun-laced bench under the branches of a low tree... and then it was gone already. Shadows and green around him, instead. He felt a strange blow to his solar plexus, another, his breath left him and he saw the world rise around and over him as his knees buckled. A strange thought intruded as he worked his mouth like a beached fish, trying to get air back in - *I'm just too damned tired to do this today.*

He let go of an ancient black door-handle as he fell, his stomach lurched, and found that he was standing in front of an aging hockey rink in Colleagueville, Vermont, in the United States, his hand just off the same... *no, this one is different, a different door-handle, bronze and different.... Whoah!*

Scott, not a hockey player but a fair judge of the inspiring, looked dubious. "You sure, Bru?" Perhaps he'd seen his friend's face. Or maybe it had all been too quick.

Bruce shrugged. He felt a lingering slight nausea, but the flash-forward was already dismissed as a flash-back. *Must have been that damned acid I took last month. Absolutely no more of that shit, ever.* He shook his head to clear it.

"Good call." Scott put a hand on his shoulder. "Drive you anywhere else you want to go check out while we're down here, eh?" *This one's a wrap.* Boston, maybe?

A truck pulled up. A guard in a blue uniform jumped out. "Help you gentlemen?"

Bruce and Scott smirked at each other. Gentlemen.

Ah, what the heck, we're here... Scott spoke up: "My friend here plays. Hockey. He's good. Maybe coming here someday." *Not likely, but* "can he see the rink?"

The guard sized them up. He looked at their car, squinted casually at the license plate. "Sure." The man walked over, flourished a keyring with myriad keys on it, picked one seemingly at random, and opened the door. "Give you the guided tour. I get called away, just don't trip on anything and make sure you push the door shut behind you so it re-locks. Take a minute to get the lights up... I'll be right back." He disappeared into a cavernous dark space behind another set of double doors.

The guard returned and gestured them inside these inner doors, into some sort of small lobby.

Ice was near - Bruce could smell it in the air as he took in his surroundings. There were small pictures of the Academy teams from over the ages arrayed around the room. The early ones in black-and-white, with five, six, ten players in them. The most recent in color, with twenty or so players, a couple of coaches, and a few other staff-people. Some photos featured an additional team member: a big plastic-headed mascot in an oversized, many-buttoned military uniform with sweeping coat-tails and an oversized foam Stetson for a hat. Beyond the next set of double doors a hockey rink was slowly forming out of the gloom as the big overhead lights warmed up. The campus guard opened the double doors and gestured them through as the dim brown-ness became sodium orange.

Every hockey rink has a different smell. Wet ice. Wood. Cement. Paint. Sweat. Leather. Mildewed padding. Tape. Each arena combined those elements into a distinct bouquet that, in Bruce's mind, immediately identified the place. *This one smells like games won.* Wide wooden beams stretched across the cavernous space above them. Small sets of wood-plank bleachers on either side framed the rink.

"I know it doesn't look like much, but those guys fill this place, every game, and they play HARD." The guard made a sweeping gesture up at championship banners hung on the high wood beams above center ice. Other schools vanquished. League tournaments won. "It's a very competitive league, Division Three, with no clearly superior school, so they usually duke it out into the late season. You should come see a game. New rink coming soon - some pictures in the lobby, if you want to check it out."

Bruce stood with his hands on his hips, looking up at the championship banners. "I've seen what I need to see." He turned to look at Scotty, while speaking to the guard. "Architecture building? Is it far away?"

"Right up the hill. I've got to check on a couple of things and get the lights. I'll meet you out by your car in a couple of minutes."

Ten minutes later the guard came out of the rink, shaking the door behind him with a rattle to check that it was locked. Bruce and Scott started to get into the car.

The guard pointed - no need. "Right up these stairs here. It's that building right up there." He was already heading up the hill on many-stepped cement stairs, ascending at something between a run and a trudge, keys and belly swinging back and forth.

The boys followed and quickly caught up.

Poof, poof, whoof, "Whew! I love this campus, but I HATE all these stairs!" The panting guard looked flustered.

They crossed a small campus road and started up another flight of stairs through a tall pinewoods on a steep hill behind a row of brick buildings. They summited the stairs at a service road that seemed to go to the back of each building. The guard bent over and put his hands on his knees. "Too many damned donuts." He looked up and grinned, still red-faced from his climb. "Anyways, this is the back." He pointed to a door. "Architecture and Art. Started this program about ten years ago, converted the building... Go ahead and walk around while I check doors." The guard had recovered enough to stand up and fish around for yet another of the hundred or so keys he carried on two large rings. "I'll meet you out front, two floors up, at the other end of the building." He unlocked the door, waved them through, pulled the door shut behind them, and flicked a door-side light switch. "Out front. That way." He pointed toward some obscure spot down the corridor and beyond the ceiling. "You'll find it." With that, he took off down a corridor, shaking office doorknobs on his way.

Bruce looked around. He and Scott were standing in a large room full of cubicles. Tops of things were visible sticking up over the tops of the uniform cubicle walls or hanging from the ceiling: plush toy animals, airplane models, the top of a skyscraper with a furry stuffed gorilla on it, numerous aluminum painter's lamps. Bruce walked into the middle of the maze. Each cubicle contained a large desk with a sloped surface. Tee-squares, protractors, and clamps were a built-in part on each of the desktops. The work surfaces were mostly empty, but Bruce could imagine them full of blueprint paper marked up with building plans and soaring dreams. The room had a comfortable, lived-in feel, even in the midst of summer. He turned. Scott was over in one of the cubicles, thumbing through a photo album. Bruce went and looked over his friend's shoulder at the album, open to a picture of a female student holding a beer and wearing a T-shirt that said "Design-Build Ball 1989." She menaced the camera with a cardboard-and-tinfoil sword. Scott turned the pages. The back of someone's head, as they hunched over one of the

desks with a building elevation coming to life under their hand. Three guys in formal wear, two ladies in prom-gowns squatting daintily in front of them, each holding some oversized mockup of a drafting tool: a very realistic slide rule, almost as tall as the standing students; a four-foot pen; a protractor cut out of cardboard or plywood; a drawing square made of two-by-fours and plywood. Fred Flintstone appeared in one picture, live and in-person, holding a beer, flanked by a VERY scantily-clad Wilma and... a female Charlie Chaplin? What looked like a presentation: starched shirts, ties, grey military uniforms, an easel. Bruce thought the uniforms looked especially good on the curvy members of the class. *Wow! Imagine sitting next to all those filled-out uniforms every day!* Another picture showed students standing behind a formal podium with a large projection of building plans in the background. Bleary-eyed students at workstations, windows black in the background, one uniformed student pointing to the clock, the moment frozen forever at two-forty-four in the morning. A black-and-white picture, a close-up of a set of smooth legs in roller blades, supporting a very female backside clad in tight leather shorty-shorts. *Nice architecture.*

Bruce decided he could like it in here, and it wasn't even a hockey rink. "What do you think, eh?"

Scotty surveyed the room around them and said, "Yeah. Yeah." To himself or to Bruce, he wasn't sure. *This place is... interesting.*

Bruce wondered if the people in the photo album were even in school anymore. Had they graduated, moved on into the real world outside, grown up, gotten jobs, made families already? Would he meet some of them in the fall, a year in the future? *Wonder if I'll meet the owner of that nice rear end on the roller blades?*

The guard was waiting when the two boys emerged out front of the building. Bruce and Scott pushed the door shut behind them and followed the blue-uniformed man on a brick walkway across an oblong square promenade. The marching-ground was bordered on all sides by a row of tall, stately trees with brick buildings set back in orderly rows on both sides behind the promenade and the trees. The guard gestured broadly with a sweep of his arm: "Dormitories. Classrooms. Okay, you two, what else do you want to see?"

Bruce tossed his head towards his friend. "Scott here wants to save the whale. Biology program?"

The guard turned to Scott. "You want to see the Wetlab?"

"Huh?"

"Wet Lab. Where they keep the critters."

"Lab mice?"

"Oh, no, a lot more than that. It's like a jungle in there...." The man in the blue uniform grinned. *The Wet Lab always snags future bio majors.*

Scott perked up. "Yah! Like, show the way, eh?"

The guard took them down a short road and into the front of a cluster of brick buildings that all looked like they belonged at different institutions: an old-fashioned, traditional brick academic building with large windows on one side, a taller, angled and more modern structure with few windows and garish stripes of white and dark red brick making a bold statement that the building DOES NOT BELONG on the other. In the middle, connecting these two, was a flat brick facade with row upon row of tiny windows and all manner of ivy growing in such thick bunches on the walls and over the windows to the extent that Bruce wondered if some jungle experiment had gone wrong.

The guard keyed in and held open a door. "Good time to be here, gentlemen. Lots of changes. This is getting renovated, too, with a new wing. Plans have a built-in greenhouse that you'll walk through on the way into the building. It's a standard pre-grad school biology program. A little local research here

and there, mostly solid foundation for whatever your frien..." The guard turned towards them. "What's your name?"

"Scott."

"Scott. Well, Scott, for whatever you're going to do in grad school after your undergraduate, if you're planning to go that far. Some of the engineering and geology classes tie in, I've heard, soils and natural history of the continent, glaciation - the college is built on a glacial feature - like I said, good basic program for a well-rounded pre-whatever-you-end-up-doing. Down these stairs."

They jogged down two flights of stairs, the guard's keys jingling and clanking to mark time with the steps. The guard paused at a plain wooden office door, and announced like a train conductor, "Okay, Wet Lab!" He put a key in the doorknob. "Please don't pick anybody up, I don't know what kind of experiments anybody might be in the middle of... handling might be bad. I don't really know." He opened the door.

A dense wave of humidity hit them from a large room cobbled into a basement alcove with uneven angles a smooth grey floor. It smelled like a pet store, or a teenaged boy's bedroom. Wet wood shavings. Crickets. Mouse piss. Stale water. Green things. Fish poop.

Scott walked into the room with bugged-out eyes and a wide grin.

The room was monopolized by a large blue kiddie-pool right in the center, water swirling in and out of it, hoses going this way and that, some sort of large pump driving it all. Something that looked like a contractor's lamp hung from the ceiling, casting a warm red glow over the little indoor pond. A turtle the size of a small plate was basking on a low rock in the middle. Around the edges of the room, at the walls and on a few makeshift shelves, were glass tanks that contained a frog or a toad sitting despondently in an inch of water. There were living aquariums: bubbly, colorful, exotic, and also the requisite and more bland feeder-fish aquariums. One tank contained cascading moss and creeping plants on rocks and old wood - water spilled down the moss into a shallow sump, where it was forever and again pumped back up to the top of the moss. A salt-water aquarium in one corner had Scott's attention: a starfish creeping across the glass over a few waving fronds of sea-plant provided an almost alien show. One side of the room was occupied by mice and white rats in glass and wire cages. There was a lot of water on the painted and sealed floor: overspray and drips from the various pumps. A few frogs hopped around loose here and there, in and out of the puddles.

Bruce watched a toad stalk and eat a cricket near one wall. He grimaced as he followed the puddles and extension cords criss-crossing across the floor. *Good business for the undertaker.* He wondered how many little critters were electrocuted in the course of a schoolyear.

Behind it all, looking out of place in this wet and wild room, a desk and a bookcase occupied the far wall. Binders and papers lay randomly in piles. Bruce walked over towards the academic and bureaucratic island to inspect some sort of colorful lizard with suction toes. The lizard, free, was climbing the wilds up the side of a plastic coffeemaker.

The guard muttered nervously: "I... think I'd... better call Tanya." Then, louder, to the boys: "I don't think they're usually this... FREE, in here. The lab director hasn't been around for a while... vacation." He looked over at the auto-perk coffee pot. "Gecko-piss coffee. Mmmmm."

Bruce and Scott stepped gingerly around the basement room, trying to inspect the various furry and scaly creatures without stepping on any of them, while the guard used the phone on the desk to call someone at home about the escapees.

"Plants?" The blue uniformed guy looked around the room. "Yah... Yes, Ma'am, they look watered." Pause. "The colored ones?" He looked over at a glass terrarium with colored frogs inside, right where they were supposed to be, clinging to mossy sticks or the inside of glass panels. "They're there." Silent, peering closely at the terrarium, then: "Yes, five." He listened for a minute, then got an

impish smile. "Sure. Welcome back! Thanks, Tanya, bye." He put the phone down and turned around. "You gentlemen want to round up some wildlife? Wash your hands in the sink o'er there, rinse off REAL well, and then corral some of these frogs, if you can." He stepped over to a sink near the desk without waiting for an answer, and by example started scrubbing, just like a surgeon. "And wash up, when you're done, too, before you leave the room. First wash is to protect them, the second to protect you when you eat your lunch." The guard went to the desk and picked up the gecko by sliding a finger up under it, between the legs, then he carried it over to a covered glass tank with a heat-lamp above it.

Bruce shrugged and joined Scott, who was already at the sink scrubbing up. The boys started chasing frogs. It took a while.

The man in the blue uniform smirked. It was quite a picture, the two kids-not-quite-adults crouched down, peering under counters and cabinets, hopping around after frogs and toads who were themselves hopping around after loose crickets. Who knew what the crickets were chasing? The guard thought to himself once more, watching his new animal control deputies: *if this room doesn't bring the aspiring biologist here, I don't know what will!* "Just put them in the kiddie pool with the turtle, if you catch any. They'll probably stay in there."

Scott carefully dropped a leopard frog into the pool. "What happened?"

"A welcome-back surprise for the lab tech coming back from her vacation. I'm kind of sorry we screwed it up." The guard thought for a moment. He went back over to the gecko cage and carefully slid his finger under the lizard once again. He carried the little creature over to the desk and set it right back where he had found it, on the coffee-maker. He dipped his fingers under the faucet and sprinkled some drops of water on the gecko. They disappeared into the skin. "He'll be alright. She comes back tomorrow. You gentlemen didn't see a thing, right?"

Bruce met with Julie from Admissions later in the morning. Scott decided to join them, on a whim. She showed up in jeans and a sweatshirt. The grey hoodie was brand-new and proudly sporting the Academy logo, of course, but Julie looked informal, friendly, welcoming. Not like other stiff-and-starched or stenciled rugby-shirt admissions personnel Bruce had met. Their guide covered the course catalogue, the athletic programs, the facilities, the costs, and the local attractions and amenities. All this while on a walking tour of the campus, pointing to the various buildings as she described the purposes and contents. She briefly described the history of The Academy and explained the regimental dorm-life that descended from the founding into the present-day structure of the student body at this private school with a gunrack in each room and its own militia.

Bruce had a bit of an idea already, from the course catalogues and brochures he'd researched, but most of this information was new to Scott.

Huh?? As the woman talked and pointed, Scott looked around for tanks, soldiers, guns. *Well, maybe they're all off in the Gulf.* He'd seen a tank, just the one, guarding the rugby pitch. *These people must REALLY take their "football" seriously.* Americans were a strange bunch.

The Academy was founded in the early 1800's as a place to form young men into learned, capable leaders for a new country that needed surveyors, architects, builders, and leaders. Local boys from around Vermont and New Hampshire - still considered the wild frontier in those early days of the new

nation - were polished on the twin stones of disciplined military training and advanced education: sciences, mathematics, military history, classic literature. For nearly two hundred years, the fortunes of this small and elite school waxed and waned with the coming and goings of war: skirmishes on the ever-westward moving frontier of the nation, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War. The school became a specialized Cavalry training ground, where graduates would be accepted immediately into military service as officers. The ever-progressive leadership of the school made sure cavalry training progressed from a stable of horses to trucks to early tanks by World War One, the Great War, the War to End All Wars, certainly the last time the country would need The Academy's graduates. That hockey rink that Bruce and Scott toured was actually the stable, built in the late 1800's when the school was bulking up for the Spanish-American War. The school nearly closed after the Versailles Treaty at the end of World War One, for lack of interest. There was no future in war, now that the greatest and most horrible of them had been fought. Other, more traditional college programs far away and in the wider world distracted area youth from the benefits of a military college lifestyle in sleepy little hamlet beside the river dividing New Hampshire and Vermont. Then came World War Two, and The Academy once again became a busy place. Every time the country needed warriors, leaders, and well-regulated troops, the nation turned once again to the graduates of the tiny university in the remote hills of New England. Wars and conflicts and D-M-Z's caused enrollment to tick back up again. The Korean conflict. Vietnam. Every peace brought a gradual contraction.

After Vietnam, the Academy became a special training ground for another, quieter kind of warrior. There were courses on Chinese culture, immersion courses in Russian language, engineering classes that focused on trajectories and ballistic coefficients and orbital physics. A graduate might head off towards Basic Training, but on completion immediately be sent to a foreign land, out of touch and also out of uniform. Some of the faculty kept an eye out for especially promising students and carefully steered their careers towards a particular branch of service or government office.

That little quad of four brick dormitories on the side of Vermont Route 5 quietly provided leader-warriors to the country for generations. Read your histories: Bull Run, Clark's Creek, Antietam, San Juan Hill, Verdun, Belleau Wood, Iwo Jima, the Solomon Islands, Tunisia, Normandy... Academy graduates were there. They were there in histories that you won't read, too: histories quietly summarized in publications carefully filed away from public view, histories that sometimes ended with an anonymous star on a wall in a discrete Three-Letter Agency lobby in Langley, Virginia.

For the Academy, the end of the Cold War became the end of many other things. Bruce and his classmates entered a school with declining enrollment, too many expenses, too much room, and more than one disaster looming. They did not know that they were to be the last traditional class to graduate. By the time they were Sophomores, the Academy was accepting civilian students. The year after they graduated, the college accepted community members to a new slate of evening classes. Five years after Bruce graduated, all new students had single, private rooms by default, because there simply were not enough bodies enrolled to fill the dorms. The next decade came, and with it a catastrophic fire that jumped across alleys and streets, from building to building. They called it the Hanover Fire, after the name of the dorm where it started. Suddenly the college was gone to history. As was Bruce by then.

But that was later.

Julie asked if there was anything in particular they wanted to see, or any building they wanted to tour. "So far, I've just shown you a lot of front doors... Do you want to take a look at the rink?" *This kid will jump at that!*

"No, I've seen what I need to."

Scott was ready to go, too. "All set here, eh."

Julie put on a smile, but inwardly she shrugged. *The hockey players always want to see the rink if they're seriously interested in the school.* She guessed that neither this one, nor his friend, would be showing up in a year's time.

That visit to Vermont gave both young men a lot to think about. Bruce and Scott visited a couple of other schools that happened to be convenient to the Great Lakes region, but the Academy was the only one that got a second visit. They came back one more time during the next school year, to see a hockey game, of course. That night after the game they walked around the campus again, from riverfront athletic fields to hilltop brick administration building. They wound through long brick boxes of classrooms, through bustling dormitories, into and out of quiet office-lined hallways. Wandering on their own this time - uninhibited by escorts or sales staff, eager to see what college life was really like on this American campus with its long military history.

Boys that age are as changeable as an April wind. That next year, as they were pushing through their Senior year of secondary school, both of the young men had applied to The Academy in far away Vermont.

Scott had suddenly decided to major in Architecture, so that he could design public zoos and aquariums.

Bruce had settled on business, so that in his retirement he could manage that pro hockey team that he would assuredly be playing for between now and then. Or maybe he would work as a sales rep for one of the better equipment companies. Or maybe he would run a stadium... Director of Facilities. One thing for sure: He would spend the next ten or twenty years on the ice. *THAT will never change!*

And that is how Bruce Sutton ended up in the family kitchen one night, trying to convince his parents that he should attend a military college in far away Vermont.

Bruce had a predictably stellar final year of Secondary School, that last winter in Toronto, both academically and on the ice. His district's team, the Maples, won three, four, six, then eight games by wide margins. Bruce didn't take many shots on goal, but when the puck was behind the opposing net, somehow he always seemed to be there with his stick curling impossibly around the post and behind the goalie's heavily padded legs. SCORE! He seemed unstoppable, he felt invincible. SCORE! He and his teammates skated their way to the regional finals, where Bruce and two of his defensemen carried the rest of the team to a final showdown with a much larger school. Sutton SCORES! Bruce swooped back and forth across the ice, always there when the puck was near the opposition's net, always near his goalie when the puck was deep in their own zone. Late in the last game of his secondary-school hockey career, he even took a chance at a slapshot from mid-ice right before the first-period ending buzzer. HE SCORES!

They lost that last game, but not by much, and they put on a good show against a much larger school with a deeper pool of talent on the team. Some of those guys were going on to the BIG hockey schools, on scholarship. There was pain, but no shame, in a two-point loss, six-to-four, in the finals against a school that had the championship five years out of every decade. He'd been sure that a final-game win would propel him into early fame - a Sports Section front page expose on this rising talent heading off to college in the States. The interview and article never came. His school hockey career faded into mediocrity and obscurity with the loss, and with it hopes of early notice by Pro recruiters evaporated into hard reality. That didn't change his plans: Bruce knew where he was going to start... he just didn't know where he was going to finish.

In just a few years, Bruce would forever Lie In State in an oversized brown paper shopping bag closed with tamper-proof evidence tape, dated and signed and then locked inside a vault consecrated by procedure, the Rule of Law, and a brief prayer service. That somber event would occur thirteen years to the day from the young man's first visit to the state, county and very town where he would die. The small ceremony would be complete with an attending Vermont State Police Color Guard of one, a Chaplain, a weary ex-Governor, a regretful Father-In-Law, and two parents who would forever wonder: *What the hell happened to our little boy?*

You, Dear Reader, are about to find out.



Chapter Two

THE PIPELINE

There is a North-South public works project through Vermont, built in the late Nineteen-Sixties and early 'Seventies with Federal Department of Transportation dollars as part of a larger, national project. The legislation authorizing this grand scheme was named the "National Civil Defense Highway Authorization Act," which was loosely conceived as a way to move Army National Guard tanks around between the fifty states in case of a Red Communist invasion of the United States mainland, or a way for city folks to beat it away from the bullseye in case of a forewarned nuclear exchange between the Superpowers. The real, unstated reason for this nationwide frenzy of construction was much simpler: citizens wanted to hop in their automobile and get cross-country quickly. But it was expedient to use the Cold War to get the funds rolling. In those times, nothing stirred hearts, minds and Federal coffers like the threat of Communist aggression. Thus, the modern interstate highway system was born.

The Soviet and Cuban invaders never materialized, and mass exodus from coastal cities is more likely to be prompted by a hurricane warning than a Global Launch Threat Assessment. But a dangerous and disruptive invader did arrive in Vermont, and it came on those very interstate highways that were built as part of the larger national network.

In the 'Seventies members of the Topdogs Motorcycle Club from all over the nation started gathering every summer at Miles Pond up in the hard-scrabble landscape of northeastern Vermont. Locals from the area remember long lines of motorcycles - all Milwaukeees or homemade jobs - parked by the dozen at intersections, exhaust pipes thundering and booming. Astride them were strangers, Outsiders: men wearing black leather jackets and denim vests with snarling three-headed dogs sewn onto the back. These TOPDOGS fellows provided an exciting and imposing presence that shattered the atmosphere of that idyllic little tourist spot on the side of a formerly quaint and quiet pond. They brought naughty four-lettered words, anti-social messages embroidered onto small personal patches on their riding

clothes, and sometimes behavior to go with the words and messages. This merry, angry mix of motorcyclists caroused freely, apparently jobless or on endless vacation, partying on into late hours of the night when the farmers were just getting up for the Early Milking. Cursing, giggling, howling... the locals couldn't figure out if these bikers were Happy Hippies or angry sons of the very Devil himself. The bikers usually came with camping gear or rudely-clad women or both on the back of the big motorcycles, as well as hair that resembled rumors of the Wild Man of Brighton Bog. They'd flock in to Miles Pond for about a week every August in a cacophony of noise and a riot of color - the flat, matte sheen of black leather and bright indigo of denim were splattered and splashed with reds and browns and royal blues announcing the common thread of the visitors. The wide and bold "TOPDOGS" ribbon running shoulder-to-shoulder told folks exactly WHICH band of outlaws had descended on the normally-quiet little spot. Wide lower patches shouted the foreign names of far-off, alien places: "Albany," "Hartford," "Scranton," "Pensacola," "Seattle."

There was a combined motor-court and campground on the eastern end of the pond. Rustic, maybe a few decades out of touch, with fire rings and picnic tables right by the water, individual tent sites, and ten cabins by the road for rent too. That's where these wild and carefree motorcyclists gathered, at first. They'd fill the place right up to overflowing, then take over the woods and fields across the road, as well. Anybody that had overlapping reservations would be wise to leave - they'd get pushed out or become part of the party otherwise.

By the early 'Eighties it had gotten bigger: the entirety of Miles Pond, all the way around, hosted one big party for half of August. Motorcyclists from all over the nation and the world descended on that little puddle like noisy, barking, migrating geese. They came for social discourse, late-night fun, and meetings about club business. Patches began to speak of international ambitions: "Saranac," "Portland," "Trenton," but also "Montreal," "Mexicali," "Caracas," "Manchester," "Liverpool," "Copenhagen," "Sao Paolo." The locations seemed endless. All of them Topdogs. With them came groupies, girlfriends, wives and pickup trucks full of beer. In later years they were followed by strippers, hookers, car trunks full of imported and not necessarily legal liquor, and big vendor-owned refrigerated beer trucks. Lots of marijuana came with these bikers, and also "California Drugs:" acid, psilocybin, angel dust, cocaine, speed, heroin.

The local community mostly welcomed them. Nothing these bikers did was overtly harmful to those wise enough to get the hell out of the way. Sales of gas and beer, cigarettes and meat at the local general store boomed in August. Campgrounds made a year's worth of revenue in two weeks, every lot booked or double-booked.

There was talk, though: some of the local young men skulked around the edges of these many-day parties, developing a taste for marijuana. Some of the town's daughters delivered babies in April and May and folks speculated on the timing. Stuff disappeared.

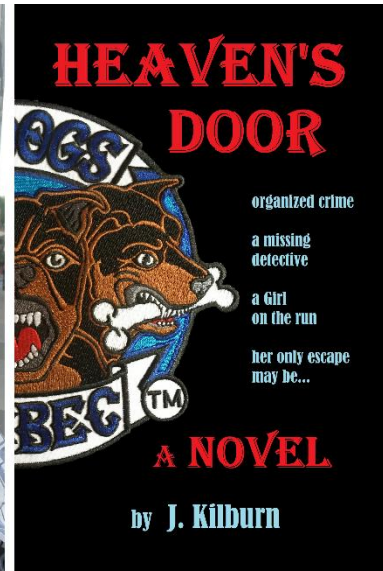
In the mid-Eighties it stopped. One summer, the annual migration never came. Life returned to normal, except that the horde of loud, laughing, angry and merry motorcyclists had themselves become the new normal, for two or three weeks each summer. And then they were gone. The campground faltered - by this time, culture had changed and folks were buying pull-behind campers and going to far-away National Parks for the summer instead of driving twenty or fifty miles down the road to the shore of a quiet little "lake." The pond-side motor inns with their tiny cottages, no amenities and 1920's feel became quiet and empty year-round. Vacationers packed up the car, hopped on the interstate, and drove all the way to salt water now. Quiet summer getaways on the shores of buggy little far-away ponds were no longer the Going Thing. Trees grew up through fire-rings. Paint, then boards, fell off the cabins. Miles Pond became as a ghost town. Even the once-busy mainline railroad faltered and died. The paved roads cracked and reverted to gravel.

The Topdogs found someplace else to go, too, as they became a part of the little pond-side burg's history. The bikers and their retinue congregated for the last time in August of 1984, then disappeared

like dissolving whisps of smoke. They left a legacy, though. Some of the folks in that area had a really strong appetite for coke and potent British Columbia weed and un-taxed Canadian whiskey. These and other illicit items flowed up and down the north-south interstate highway through Vermont and New Hampshire in an international flood of wealth and ills that caused regional police agencies and their officers to give their stretch of this nationwide highway system its own local nickname: "The Pipeline."

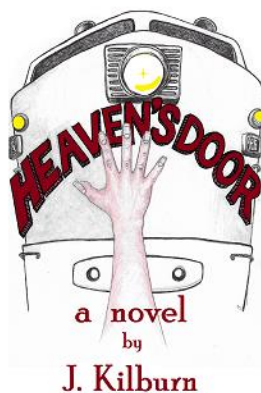
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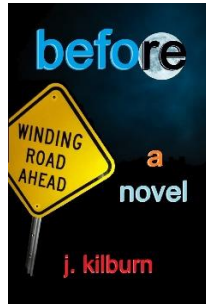
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