

A hand is shown from the left, reaching out and touching a surface that resembles cracked glass or a mosaic. The surface is composed of many small, irregular, light blue and white tiles. The hand is dark, and its fingers are spread out against the surface. The background is a bright, glowing light source, possibly the sun, which creates a radial pattern of light rays across the entire scene. The overall color palette is dominated by light blues, whites, and greys, with the dark silhouette of the hand providing a strong contrast.

Bad Day  
for the  
Home  
Team

ALEX O'MEARA

## *There was movement.*

Chairs scraped against the floor.

“Okay,” the shooter said. “It’s all okay.”

Sounds gained momentum and built on one another.

“All right now.” The shooter spoke only to himself but didn’t know it. “It’s fine.”

A wall of noise and panic moved in on him. There were screams. The man who had been shot slapped the floor with a flat, open hand. He kicked the table leg with his heel. Silverware went flying across tabletops.

“Mike,” the wife whispered. Then she yelled “Mike!” over and over while another woman, a large one in a yellow flower-print sundress, grabbed her purse, put it in the bend of her elbow and started running. She had one hand over her mouth.

The shooter felt vibrations through the floor. He felt them through the soles of his feet.

“Mike!” the woman yelled. “Oh my God Mike oh my God.”

The shooter yelled, but no one heard him over the noise and the awakening to the reality of what was going on.

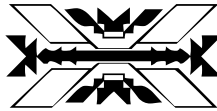
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## *It was amazing.*



**BAD DAY**  
*For The*  
**HOME TEAM**



**ALEX O'MEARA**



Zumaya Eclectica



Austin TX

2010

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

**BAD DAY FOR THE HOME TEAM**

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*For Karen O'Meara*

If Van Gogh were alive today, I think he'd take a few people with him before he killed himself.

– Sam Tryor

— 1 —

It just went off, like, *oops*. The first shot hit solid and sent a guy cutting pizza for his son back into a wall.

“Wow,” the shooter said. “I’m sorry.”

He apologized in the same tone a mother uses when she tells her child the hamster died.

“What was that?” someone said. “What the hell?”

The shooter looked at his gun. A woman went over to the man who had been shot. She looked at the shooter with an expression like the saleslady in the china shop about to say, *You know you have to pay for that now, don't you?* The toddler with them—he couldn't have been more than four—put a bite of pizza into his mouth and looked at the man. He clapped his hands like he was saying *goody-goody gumdrops!*

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He fired multiple shots in a line. It was a dotted line that started in the center of the woman in the yellow sundress and led away from her. She went down. Her purse trailed after her. The man next to her was shot in the throat.

It was amazing.

A kid in a corduroy baseball cap looked at him. He held his right ear and just stood there with his mouth open. At first he didn’t move to protect anyone, not even himself. Then he turned to get out of there and tell someone about it.

“Don’t leave.” the shooter told him.

He resumed firing. Shell casings dropped to the floor with hollow clinks.

“Don’t,” he said.

More people fell. Some staggered forward from the impact then fell. Others just sank. It was crazy. The shooter walked a few steps. He looked like his legs had gone to sleep and he wanted to wake them up.



“God, I’m sweating,” he said.

He ran for the door to get in front of it, to block it.

“No,” he said. “Okay. Okay.” He put his arm around the shoulder of the kid who had held his ear. “Go and sit down now,” he said to him gently. “Everybody, listen. I want everybody to just listen.”

Everybody huddled in two groups in the corners about twenty feet away. They moved chairs in front of them and held on to table legs for protection. One woman said “Hail, Mary.” Another said, “Mike, wake up.”

“It’s all right now,” the shooter assured them.

No one believed him. He’d always had trouble talking in front of groups. He preferred the one-on-one.

“Is there anyone in the back there?” he asked the kid in the baseball cap. “Go check. Go. You.”

It took the young man three tries to open the swinging half-door to the kitchen.

“Pull it. Try pulling it. That’s the stuff. Good.”

There was heavy breathing. Everything in the room was becoming less fuzzy. Strangers looked at one another to confirm what was happening was really happening. The two clumps of people huddled tighter together and looked at the gun. They didn’t look at him. He was obscured by the greater reality of the gun.

He looked like he didn’t know what to do. He just stood there.

“He’s alive,” someone screamed.

“No one’s back there,” the kid said in a twisted yell once he came back from the kitchen. He was still holding his ear. “Can I go now? I’d like to go. Now. I’ll just...”

And he left.

The first guy who was shot was still hitting the floor with his hand. It was soft as a whisper. Slap, slap, slap.

The guy with the gun looked out a window with the blinds up. The sunny day continued. The cars passed on Fry Boulevard. The tires made that sizzling sound.

“Do something,” said a woman in the corner to her boyfriend. “Do something, Jerry. Look at him.”

She wanted him to be a hero. That was a mistake.

Jerry got up and made it only three steps before he was shot in the chest. A smattering of goo hit against the window with a splat. Behind the balls of blood, the shooter saw a man in the parking lot get out of his car. He saw him look at the restaurant window.

“I got to do it,” the shooter said.

He braced the gun against his shoulder and kept it low while he walked and fired. People scattered, and a few hit the ground. One man with blond hair and a chain that held his wallet to his belt loop crouched behind the dead woman in the yellow sundress and called for his mother.

The shooter straight-line walked and shot on automatic. It looked very easy. The clip emptied. He reloaded and continued until he was about five feet from the wall.

“Oh, damn,” he said, like he’d forgotten to mail something.

He turned around to face the other group of people and shot a college girl as she ran for the door. She wore a T-shirt, bathing suit bottom and flip-flops. When she fell, the flip-flops slapped against her heel one last time and that was it.

People dove under tables. They kicked and hurled their bodies into tight places. They scratched along the Mexican tiled floor. It was very fast. Everyone moved very fast.

A woman off to the side noticed the shooter’s face. She saw that his eyes were absolutely huge.

“Hot bullets,” he said to no one in particular.

He stopped at a table and poured a Pepsi on the gun, and on his hand. He stopped firing and watched a man behind the wheel of a car in the parking lot. The man’s hand slipped along the gearshift as he put it in reverse. He was horrified, looking into the restaurant, but he was still a careful driver: He checked his mirrors before he backed up.

He was sure to call someone. They would come soon.

The shooter adjusted his grip on the gun. The woman watched his knuckles carefully. She saw them turn from white to red when he relaxed his hands. She saw them tense and go white again and held her breath.

He gripped the gun, and sucked in as hard as a long-jumper before a leap. Then he just went everywhere with the gun. The barrel flying hot, shots opened along the wall, glass shattered, an upper arm got all chewed up, and the cash register got hit. Its drawer popped open like a tongue. The shooter raised his foot high and kicked it hard. Nickels, dimes, quarters and pennies sprinkled down. Bills fluttered. They looked absurd in the smoke, and weirder still when they landed. One \$20 bill soaked up the blood on a hole in the college girl's forehead.

"He's a mess," Jerry's girlfriend said. She was on the floor holding him as he spasmed. His shirt was reddened wounds. "This is a mess." The woman stroked his head and muttered. "Jerry, do something. Do something, Jerry, do something."

A girl noticed the shooter looked tired. *Weary* was the word, she thought.

He raised the gun to fire and everyone tensed, but then he didn't shoot. He dropped to a relaxed position. He thrust his arm with the gun forward, like he was trying to shake it off. Then he did, and the gun clattered to the ground, empty. He looked around, picked up an iced tea and took a long gulp.

"I always liked iced tea."

No one moved when he spoke. A lot of people kept their eyes on the gun, even though it was on the floor. For a few moments now, everyone had been quiet and still. It was like the silence when no one can think of what to say at a party.

"Looks like a bad day for the home team," the shooter said.

He pulled a pistol from his back pocket and put the barrel in his mouth.

“Oh, yes, finally, you fuck,” a voice said.

He looked toward the ceiling where an overhead fan spun slowly. He took the gun from his mouth and aimed it around. But he didn't shoot.

“Come on,” someone said.

Ten feet away, a black woman stood up, walked to the door and said, “Let me. I'll do it if you can't.”

“No, that's fine,” he said. “Thank you. I can take care of it. I can.”

“All right, then,” the woman said.

The other people started moving.

“Don't,” he said quietly. “Don't move.”

It was so sunny out. It was a good day. He put the tip of the gun to his mouth.

“Bad day for the home team,” he said. “I'm sorry about all this.”

He pulled the trigger.

— 2 —

It was the middle of the afternoon. My brother Nick had just woken up from a nap. His house was musty and hazy. He was talking on the phone with someone named Charlie. They were talking about a shooting at the Pizza Man restaurant.

I heard “Pizza Man,” and I knew I was dead. I couldn’t remember a thing about it, but I knew. I felt calm.

“Do you think Sam was there?” Nick said to Charlie.

I stood behind the easy chair, off to the side, dead. When I say *dead*, I don’t mean like “I’m in trouble” or “I’m very tired.” I mean as in *deceased*. As in *not living*. I said the word over and over to myself until it sank in and lost all meaning.

My body felt the same way as a house when the power goes out, still and oddly peaceful. There was no hum of activity coming from inside me. I was freed from the simplest physical effort. I was not breathing. My heart was not beating. Gravity was not pulling on those extra twenty pounds that made it a little tough for me to get around. I had no

aches or pains. My eyes did not blink. I did not float. I stood there, and the chair went right through where my stomach would have been.

Nick was still on the phone, listening to Charlie. He lit a cigarette. I knew he wanted to quit. I knew he never would. I hadn't been able to. I wondered if, now I was dead, that meant I had finally quit. I didn't know the rules about smoking after death. I didn't know the rules about being dead.

Nick asked Charlie if he thought I was in the Pizza Man. Then he listened to him answer. I thought about my situation.

Let me tell you about being dead. There was no bright light to move toward or away from. There was no organ music. I did not see my great-aunt Betty or meet Abraham Lincoln. I did not see gates, pearly or otherwise, and I did not see Jesus. If I had seen Him, I would have asked Him how I got where I was.

I had no idea how I died. That made me uneasy.

If I could start from my life and work forward maybe, I thought, I could figure it out. But I didn't know anything about my life. My power-outage calm turned into a slow panic. Hell of a day, I thought. First I die, then I lose my life.

I took stock of what I did know. I was at my brother Nick's, house. My name was Sam Tryor, I was fifty-two years old, and I lived in Sierra Vista, Arizona. I was wearing tan pants, black shoes, white socks, a white short-sleeved shirt and a tie from Miami Beach. I was a lousy dresser. Was I married? Nope. I looked at my left hand, and I didn't have a wedding ring. What I did have was a splitting headache and a nagging feeling that, in addition to my being dead, something was very wrong.

"No," Nick said into the phone, "Sam didn't drink. I mean, not a lot. Not in the middle of the afternoon."

That triggered something. One time I got really drunk on tequila, woke up the next morning and realized I had blacked out. I asked my friends what I did the night before. It turned out all I did was drum on pillows and pots and pans while insisting over and over that I was the Tito Puente of the bongos.

I wanted to ask Nick what I did the night before, about my life before. Was I left- or right-handed? What did I do for a living? Was I a cat or a dog person? Was I cool?

I sat next to Nick on the couch.

“Boo!” I said. “Boo, Nicky! It’s me, Sam. Boo! Hello?”

Nothing. I waved my arms and yelled as loud as I could. No reaction. Nick said to Charlie on the phone, “Yes, Sam was in the army. I don’t remember his rank.”

Yes, yes! I had been in the army! Great. I loved the army. The army taught me I was not unique, not special, not creative, not even interesting. I remembered. And from the first day I joined, the army loved me.

They gave me a skills aptitude test when I enlisted. They wanted to see if I was better suited to be a marksman or a cook. I filled in the fifty little circles for the fifty little questions, and the sergeant called his lieutenant over. The lieutenant said he’d never seen anything like it. They double-checked my answers then made me take the test over. Same results. Amazing. The test said I was best suited to be a US Army private.

They told me to take a different, more detailed test that measured basically the same thing. The army had lots of tests. They got the same results. I was born to be a US Army private. The test also showed that I thought of myself as nothing more than what I was. They said I was “spectacularly normal” and that made me “profoundly malleable and psychologically flexible.” They said I was “uniquely incapable of considering abstraction.” They slotted me for CIA training.

I remembered something. Good.

Nick hung up the phone. He decided to go to the scene of the shooting at the Pizza Man and find out what was going on. He headed for the bathroom to splash a little water on his face, brush his teeth, floss.

While Nick was in the bathroom, I saw a photo of him and me on the wall. Every year we took a new photo of us together on Nick's birthday. It was a tradition. I stared at the photo. I looked like a felon. I looked like I lacked confidence. My nose was too big. My arms hung stupidly at my sides. My grin looked fake and forced. I was slumping. My skin was blotchy. A picture for posterity, and I stood there looking more pathetic than a day-shift stripper.

Nick radiated success and confidence. He was proud. He beamed. He looked like whoever saw that picture should send him a check as a thank-you for the privilege of seeing that picture. My brother, I remembered, was a millionaire.

I saw my reflection in the glass of the photo. There wasn't a mark on me. I must have died of a heart attack. It was better than dying in a pizza place. No one in their right mind wants to die in a pizza place. I looked like the kind of guy who would die of a heart attack. I hoped that was it. I wanted it to be a massive coronary infarction occlusion.

My father died of a heart attack. He was standing in his skivvies at the open refrigerator at two a.m., reaching for another Falstaff, and he keeled over, stiffer than a Presbyterian at Mardi Gras before he even hit the floor. For the first time, I wanted to take after the old man. I wanted to have been standing there one minute and—wham!—kissing the linoleum the next. Something told me that wasn't the case.

Nick was convinced I had been shot in the Pizza Man.

I knew that because I could read his mind. The hits kept coming. I was hot-wired into his brain. I thought about the blackout when he mentioned booze. I thought about the



army only after he mentioned it. His photos and his house sent me off remembering things. It was like he was a radio receiver, and I was getting all my information through him.

I poked my head into the bathroom. Nick looked into the mirror for a long time. He wanted to get going, he wanted to take steps, but he wasn't ready. One more cigarette, then he would be ready. He didn't know for sure that I was dead, but he had a feeling about it.

He lit a Camel Light and looked at himself in the bathroom mirror. I had no idea he spent so much time looking at himself. He flicked his cigarette ash into the sink. He leaned forward and stared deep into his own eyes. He thought about the first time he lost his mind. He wondered if he might be losing it again now.

For seventeen months, Nick did not leave his house and did not say a word. He ordered his food, movies, laundry, dry cleaning, booze and whatever else he needed over the internet. To get out of his depression, he set about reinventing himself.

Even though he wasn't much of a drinker, drinking seemed like a good idea to him. So, for a few months Nick drank. A lot. Then he stopped. He realized he wasn't a drunk.

Then he went on a health kick. Truth be told, I liked him better when he drank. He put a treadmill in the corner of the basement, started running every day, weighed his food before each meal and dropped seventy-five pounds. Then he stopped.

For three months, he watched satellite TV. For a month, he was busy with his divorce. After that, for four months, he became obsessed with tracking down every single person from his childhood—teachers, coaches, friends, neighbors from Detroit, you name it. He sent money to some, wrote long letters to others and had cybersex with three, including his fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Freidkin. Then he stopped.

He taught himself Spanish, but because he wasn't talking to anyone, it was only in his head. He read the *World Book Encyclopedia*. In his basement, he constructed an incredibly precise model of the entire borough of Brooklyn. It was while he was putting the finishing touches on Montgomery Clift's gravesite in the Quaker Cemetery in Prospect Park that his mind came back to him. It returned like it was nothing more than a lost cat that had finally found its way home.

The moment he glued the plastic ivy onto Monty Clift's grave, Nick recognized something important about himself. It was a quality I possessed and he always envied me for. The army thought I was uniquely gifted because of it. Here's what it was:

I was average height, a little over average weight, average smarts. I wasn't particularly gifted or unique. I was not sensitive or charming. I knew nothing about wine and had no desire to see the Cathedral at Chartres. I had no great enthusiasm to change the world, to save or serve the needs of people, to save or serve the whales or stray animals. I did not want to save others, or even myself, from any vices. I was not blessed with special insight about God or the world. Politicians were just sons of bitches who bored me. Nick had one child to lug him to the grave, but if she didn't want the job, that was fine with him. I had no children to carry me or carry on for me, and that was fine. Everything, for me, was always fine.

What made me special was that I knew I was nothing special. That day, Nick realized the same thing about himself. He was just Nick. He always would be Nick. He gave up on any notion of reinventing himself as a drinker, as an athlete, as anything other than who he was. It took him seventeen months and losing his mind to realize who he was, but he did it.

“I am nuts,” Nick said out loud to his miniature version of Brooklyn that day. “I am bolts. That’s who I am. That has never changed. That will never change.”

The morning he broke his silence, I came over and, like I did every day, made him breakfast of eggs over hard, rye toast and sausages. We sat in his kitchen, and just like the previous seventeen months, he was stone silent. He went by me like I was a ghost.

When he was done with the eggs but before he got to the sausages, the first thing he said was, “We should buy a Ford Fairlane. We should retrace our steps from when we came out here from Detroit. We can see where we went wrong.”

“You’re a weird fuckin’ guy, Nick,” I said. “Weird fuckin’.”

“Your mother.”

“Hey, Nick,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“Shut the fuck up already.”



Now Nick stood at the bathroom sink getting ready to leave for the Pizza Man, smoking and thinking. As he did, every one of my dead synapses crackled with life.

Nick spent one last moment checking himself out in the mirror.

*I am nuts. I am bolts. I need logistics,* he thought.

That’s how he learned to dance. He was eight years old, and he used those black footsteps—the kind with the heel and the toe set out on paper. The concept of rhythm and placement went from a mishmash blur to clear reality for him, thanks to an easy-to-follow diagram that let him put his feet on the feet provided.

I, on the other hand, was more of a creative thinker. I was a self-starter. I needed no such instructions. I made up the

rules for myself and went with my gut. I was a rebel, an idea man

Actually, that's a lie. Except for the few morsels I learned through Nick, I still had no idea about who I was before I died. My normalcy didn't necessarily mean I wasn't a success. I could have cured cancer, won the Nobel Peace Prize and been married at one time to a Norwegian supermodel. Or, I could have been a surly mouth-breather who drank 40s and mainlined heroin every day of my adult life. I didn't care either way. I just wanted to find out.

"The point is to find out," Nick said to his reflection in the bathroom. "To find out, you go where someone knows. Who knows? The police. So, go where it happened. The scene of the crime."

He walked purposefully into the living room and grabbed his car keys. He stopped as his hand grasped the doorknob. *Everything will be all right. Nothing ever changes.* Even as he thought it, Nick knew somewhere inside—deep inside—that by the time he got back to his house later, everything would be changed.

I knew it, too.

In the car, Nick went over what he knew: *Sam might be at a restaurant where a shooting took place. Charlie'd said, "It could be Sam." What could be Sam? Do not over-think this. Does this mean Sam's dead? Am I losing my mind? Again? It was different last time. This feels different. Did Sam get shot in a restaurant? Would he? Could he? Charlie's an ex-cop. Sam.*

As kids we would say, "What would I do without you?" We would plan our reaction to each other's death, the way brothers do. The old Us Against the World. There were times when I wanted him to be dead so I could be pitied. They would let me out of school for months. The dumb stuff you think as a kid. I should do something here. Sam is dead. Is he?

At first, after I knew I was dead, there was the sensation of floating on an ocean of calm. Then, when I couldn't remember how I died, a little island of unease appeared and I was floating on more of a lake of calm. By the time I realized my entire life was wiped from my memory, the calm was a puddle and the unease had grown into a continent. I was dead, but I was not gone.

It was obvious: I was a ghost.

I had never seen a ghost, but when I was a kid I loved to take a flashlight under the covers and read ghost stories. I remembered them all.

On March 13, 1956, Mildred Ann Reynolds was killed in her car in Avarad, Oklahoma. Her murder was never solved. It is said that, occasionally, Ms. Reynolds likes to come in to Vina Rae's Grill wearing the same green dress she was killed in. She never orders anything, and she doesn't make eye contact with anyone.

Does Mildred Ann hear people debate between tuna in oil or water in the Safeway? As she comes in contact with people as she goes around trying to find her killer, does she instantly know the kind of backpack each one of those people carried in the third grade? Is she looking for her killer? If they solve the crime, will she go away?

Is it a hard-and-fast rule that ghosts are on a mission?

One block after Nick turned onto Fry Boulevard to go to the Pizza Man, his car got trapped in a swarm of police and ambulance sirens. They were all around us one moment and gone the next. For that second inside the pulsing lights, it sounded like the blitz. Nick watched the red, amber and blue beating lights take off down the street in front of him. They were going where he was going. He lit another cigarette off the one he was smoking.

It wasn't a heart attack. My gut told me I hadn't been that lucky. It told me I had been gunned down in the Pizza Man.

If they solved my murder, I wondered, would I go away? Was I there to solve the shooting at the Pizza Man, like Mildred Ann was sent to solve her murder? Was that my mission?

"Nicky," I said one more time, "it's me! Boo!"

Nothing.

Some ghost. My mother's words came back to haunt me —I was an underachiever.

The Pizza Man was just up ahead.

— 3 —

The next thing I knew, I was with an enormous black guy driving down Fry Boulevard. He was tapping his foot on the accelerator, making his huge Cadillac lurch like a Tilt-A-Whirl gone bad. He kept repeating, “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.”

“Come on, now,” he said. “Let’s go here. Jesus, people. No timing.”

He had a gun. It was in a holster and poked out from under his suit jacket.

He was yelling his head off.

Then I saw his badge. The guy’s name was Walter Perry. He was a Sierra Vista detective. A lieutenant. Before that, he had been a cop in Baltimore. I knew where he went to grammar school. I knew that in the third grade he carried a *Six Million-Dollar Man* lunchbox with a Scooby Doo thermos. It really pissed him off that the thermos and lunchbox

didn't match. I knew the name of Perry's pet turtle when he was seven years old.

It was Poke, as in slow.

There was a movie with Christopher Walken called *The Dead Zone*. He played a guy who woke up from a coma after five years with the ability to tell the future when he shook hands with someone. He would get all freaked out and go into a trance. Then he would set out to change the future if it was horrible. Being a Stephen King story, it was usually horrible. Christopher Walken's character was confused and conflicted because of the global and moral implications that arose from trying to change the future.

I was confused and conflicted from the stress of trying to know the past. Being a ghost was proving to be way over my head. I wanted to pick up a pen and make a list of what was good about my ghostly powers and what was bad. I wondered if Superman had wanted to do the same thing when he was a kid figuring it all out. Under *Good* he would put flying, superhuman strength and x-ray vision. Under *Bad* he would put having to be Clark Kent, not being able to hook up with Lois Lane and kryptonite, which he probably underlined four times.

Underneath *Good* I'd put my ability to read thoughts, which was pretty cool, and the ability to know things about a person, especially about their past, when I came into contact with them. I knew parts of Perry's past, and I also felt like I knew Perry instantaneously. Under *Bad*, I'd put that I jumped from place to place and person to person with no warning, that I couldn't remember my own life, and that I had no control over my mind-reading. When I tried to read Perry's thoughts, I got nothing. The information just came unbidden, unstructured and unfiltered.

For instance, I knew that Perry was going to the Pizza Man because a cop named Raphael Cortez was losing con-



trol of the situation there. I knew that because I knew Perry had been at home when he heard the scanner traffic. It was Cortez and Bev, the dispatcher. They were failing to negotiate the chaos of the shooting. He got in his car and drove to the scene. He dragged his thoughts over the possibilities. He was always prepared for the worst.

He had three police scanners. Scanners were Perry's way of remaining connected to his work. As a cop, that meant being connected to his life. The pops and hisses were more than a comfort to him. The grating crackle was an umbilical to his very being.

His home scanner was in the kitchen, just above the sink and under the spice rack. His wife would turn it down when he was away. When he came home he went right to it and cranked it up. It didn't matter much because his wife was rarely around. She was usually out on a date.

He carried a handheld scanner in case of power outages. His third scanner was under the dash in his Cadillac, a 1973 Eldorado. Perry stood six feet, five inches and topped the scale at two hundred-forty-five pounds, and, man, he loved his big-ass Caddy with the 550-cubic-inch engine block. Everyone had their idea of art, and for Perry, art came out of Detroit in the 1970s

I knew Perry didn't yell or use words like *dickstump* at home, at work or in the grocery store. It was only when he was going down the road, in his car, with the world in his sights, that he became a freak. He once spent five minutes cursing out a nun on a Sunday for not using her turn signal. He once yelled at a guy with a broken foot who was limping slowly in front of his car, "Hurry up or I'll take your other leg." And he meant it.

"Hey! Hey, dickhead!" Perry yelled as we went down Fry Boulevard. "Look where you're going. This isn't a carnival here. This is the real thing. Come on, come on, come on. I

don't have all day. Ralph might be in trouble, people. Let's move."

Perry wasn't bashful about his size. He stood straight with his shoulders back and his head held high, just like his five-foot, eight-inch-tall daddy told him to.

That's about all I knew about Walter Perry at the moment the police scanner in the Cadillac went quiet. Perry slowed down as he drove along Fry. He tapped the scanner with his finger, swerved into the next lane and cut off a pick-up truck.

Dead scanner, he thought. Not a good thing.

He got nervous when things got quiet.

Perry thought about when he was a fresh cop back in Baltimore. Three years out of the academy, and he was so eager, so tightly wound. Every day, every call for him was going to be *the thing*. The *bad thing*. He knew it. He felt marked. Pulling someone over for a traffic ticket, he was such a mass of tension it was amazing he could even move his legs to walk over to the driver's-side window. He saw buildings in peripheral vision down to being able to tell whether the blinds in the windows were up or down. He memorized locations, angles, weather patterns, the play of shadows in the trees. He would voice narration of the scene in the voice of Walter Winchell introducing an episode of *The Untouchables*.

Walter Perry was a good cop. He'd never had to unholster his gun until that day at 2:53 on a hot side street when the white Dodge cruised through a stoplight then idled roughly, waiting for him

Winchell never narrated a story where Perry was the hero. He always put Perry in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Perry thought about the day Walter Winchell called it right.

A sweaty, stupid junkie in Baltimore held up a liquor store with a shotgun. The dumb kid could barely hold the big barrel horizontal. The guy behind the counter handed him all the money in a paper bag, but the kid stayed there thinking about whatever it was junkies think about when they rob people. At last, the kid said, "Bushmills. I want some of that. My old man drank that shit."

"Isn't that sweet," the man behind the counter said.

"Don't fuck with me about my old man!" *Bam!* The display of airline liquor bottles took a direct shotgun blast.

The man in the liquor store practically threw the kid his bottle.

"Put it in a bag," the junkie said. "Cops see me with a bottle they're going to hassle me, man. See? I know stuff."

He did like the kid said.

"Okay, now. Yeah." The kid looked around jerkily. "All right. I'm gone."

The kid turned to the door and saw Perry peering in. They startled one another. Perry went for it, but he was a moment off. The blast of pellets and glass caught him in the neck and face. He swore he saw debris rushing at him in slow motion, and if he hadn't tucked his head down, he'd be blind.

The kid rushed through the hole where the door's glass had been a second before, and Perry tackled him and hugged him so tight blood squirted from the holes in his face.

In the emergency room, Perry counted the metal pellets and glass slivers as fifty-two of them were dropped from tweezers into a metal bowl. Fifty-two cards in a deck. Fifty-two weeks in a year. When fifty-two American hostages were captured in Iran, Perry believed there was a pattern at work that included him.

He may have been on to something. I was fifty-two years old when I died.

Perry left Baltimore looking like he'd survived a bad case of chicken pox. He went west, to Arizona. There were no secrets in the city, he said. Too many people regarded him as "the shot cop." His driving got worse. He was worn out. He spent all that time waiting for the thing only to be proven right. In Sierra Vista, not only did the thing never happen, nothing ever happened. It was a small hick town, and for Perry, it was perfect. Perry's Walter Winchell narration was now only a private joke with himself. Sometimes, he would forget and narrate out loud.

"It's cop stuff," he would say to the citizen who called him on it. "You wouldn't understand. Cop stuff. Give me your license so I don't have to shoot you."

A Subaru came to a sudden stop at a yellow light in front of Perry on Fry Boulevard and yanked him out of his reverie. The girl in the car got very busy looking at her lips in the rearview.

"Hey, you fuckwad, asswipe piece of shit," Perry yelled. "I'm driving here. Call in, Ralph. Call in."

Jesus. Why are blondes always driving red cars? When are they going to learn they look better in Jeeps?

His thoughts were trying to cover up the awful, empty nothing coming from the scanner. Perry was only five blocks away from the Pizza Man. Five blocks and two unsynchronized lights away from the crime scene, and neither he nor I had any idea what was happening. All we had was a bad feeling.

He saw a car with a bumper sticker that said: *THERE'S NOTHING IN THIS TRUCK WORTH YOUR LIFE.*

He sat at the light and looked into the blonde's rearview eyes. He wished he had sirens and a gun turret mounted on the roof of his car.

One block farther, and he hit the next red.

He had good reason to be worried about what was happening at the Pizza Man.

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