

Excerpt from *Randham Acts*

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Chapter Nineteen

They had been driving around since midnight. The dashboard clock now edged toward two a.m. The radio blared and everybody was drunk. Everyone but Les, who sat at the wheel. It was Saturday night, Labor Day weekend, time for one last blowout before school on Tuesday.

Les and Mitch were up front with Lisa Stinson between them. They met her through Sue Maglen last year. Lisa partied with the guys most of the summer and was Les' sort-of girlfriend. Mitch sat behind Les, and Adam dozed against window behind Randy. Between them was Mitch's girlfriend, Vonda Neibul.

Les drove his mother's car with one hand on the steering wheel, the other cocked out the window. He was the best driver of the bunch, still months away from his learner's permit. Out of the few cars he ever drove, this was his favorite: his mother's midnight blue Cougar, fully loaded. No problem scoring the car, his mother was out of town for the weekend at her boyfriend's cottage. One of the neighbors might rat him out, but if the car returned to the garage unscratched and with a full tank of gas, he guessed his mother wouldn't be too bothered. He'd been living with her since his folks' divorce the year before, and it was like she'd gone back to high school: guys calling for her, going out on dates. Now she had a *boyfriend*, some slick-dick with bleached hair, a fancy convertible, and not even thirty years old.

"We should cruise downtown!" Mitch shouted.

"Use your head," Randy said. "Know how many cops are there tonight?"

"I've been using my head all night," Mitch said, spraying spit all over the place. "Pouring beer into it!" He barked laughter, while everyone else rolled their eyes. Everyone except Adam. He'd gone hard at the beer early and was almost asleep on his feet by the time they piled into the car. In spite of the loud music, he dozed against the window.

Some nights it was great. The week before he almost made a move on Sue Maglen. *You're fucking gorgeous*, he slurred in her ear. Next morning he stung with embarrassment while suffering his hangover. Everyone had heard him, and the guys wouldn't leave him alone about it.

Adam took it all, pretending that he'd been too drunk to remember. But he remembered. And was glad he said it. He had a thing for Sue since they met the first day of ninth grade. He said nothing to his friends about that. They could laugh and joke and slag each other's clothes, mothers, music, but no way Adam would let them in on this. He knew they all felt the same about Sue,

masking it with jokes about humping her in her swimming pool, or the locker room at school. Adam heard the talk that Sue had done it with a couple of eleventh grade guys during a party last year.

He drifted in and out of the same dream: running through neighborhoods he didn't recognize. The moon above morphed into a face. He snapped awake, banging his head against the window.

"Are you okay?" Vonda said, grimacing, as though afraid he'd heave on her.

Adam nodded. Looked out the window, suddenly feeling too warm, uncomfortable, crammed into the backseat. Wished they would pull over and get some air. Then he was dreaming again, running through those strange neighborhoods.

He woke to Vonda's voice. "Get *off* me!"

Adam opened his eyes, and saw he was slumped against her.

"What the fuck are you trying to do?" Mitch slurred. The guys hated being around him when he was with Vonda.

"He's gonna puke!" Vonda said.

Les shut the radio off. "What?!"

"He's gonna be sick!"

They were cruising through neighborhoods, so Les had no trouble pulling over and getting Adam out of the car. Adam stepped away, leaned against a tree. The night air felt good on his clammy face.

"Shit, man," Les said, "puke in Mom's car, and she'll eat me *and* shit me out."

"I'm all right," Adam said. "Just need the air."

"Come on," Randy said. "If he ain't gonna puke, let's go."

Les looked at Adam. "Sure you're okay?"

"Yeah." He looked around. Les' house was a twenty-minute walk from there. "I gotta walk this off."

"What? Nah, get back in the car."

"I'll meet you at the house."

"If he wants to walk," Randy said, "let him walk."

"You sure?" Les said.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

The car pulled away and the booming baseline resumed on the stereo. Adam watched the car's taillights move up the street until they passed out of sight. He started down the sidewalk, wondering if he was actually up to walking back to the house.

That dream, he thought. He woke with a shout from the same dream earlier in the week at Mitch's house. Woke Mitch and his folks. His dad knocked on the door and asked if everything was okay. When Mitch asked the next morning about the dream, Adam said he couldn't remember it. But he had.

Dreams were so strange, how the weirdest shit could happen, but somehow made sense. Because when Adam's dream-self saw that full, brooding moon turning into a face, he believed it. Unlike most dreams, where the bizarre images and confusing situations lose their scary edge upon waking, a thread of unalloyed fear wormed through Adam when he thought of that moon morphing into a face.

His grandfather's face.

Grandpa was the first dead person I ever saw. Adam was surprised by the suddenness and clarity of the thought. *Died in my bed.*

He recalled waking on the basement couch that morning, hearing his mother's scream. By the time he got to his bedroom, Stephanie had gone next door to call an ambulance. Adam approached, hit by that piss/shit stench of the old man even before getting to the door. His mother knelt by the bed, holding Grandpa's hand. Adam had never seen her cry. He stood there, transfixed, looking at his grandfather. The old man died with his eyes open.

When Stephanie returned, she made Adam stay in her room until the ambulance had come and gone. The next day, at the funeral home, he heard his mother saying that Grandpa had died peacefully in his sleep. *But his eyes were open*, Adam thought. Whenever he saw the old man in dreams, Adam saw those wide dead eyes. Standing in the doorway of his room, he knew it was Grandpa lying in the bed, but at the same time it wasn't. It was just as shell.

Like Mom, Adam thought. *With that look in her eyes. She's Mom, except she's not really.*

It was no use ignoring the obvious. *She's getting sick again.*

Last Thursday, spending an odd night at home, he woke in the middle of the night to the *clink* and *clack* of dishes. He went into the kitchen. The counters were filled with pots and pans, plastic containers. Every glass and cup and piece of cutlery in the house was laid out.

"What're you doing?" he said. "Why don't you use the dishwasher?"

His mother glared at him, pinning Adam where he stood. "The dishes have to be *clean!*" she said. "The dishwasher leaves *spots!*"

The street sign at the corner read Gardenia Avenue. He was off track. There was a moment where he flushed with frustration at making his walk longer. Then something occurred to him.

Sue lives on Gardenia, he thought. He was four blocks away from her house.

He walked up her street. *Just to see her house.*

Fifteen minutes later he stood in front of her house.

Her bedroom's around the back, he thought. *If I could get on top of that fence, I could climb onto the roof... and tap on her window.* The thought filled him with that nervous tingling joy, eclipsing his waning drunk.

She's probably not home. But he couldn't walk away. *Well, I'm here.*

The privacy fence stood six and a half feet high. Its vertical boards offered no footholds. He reached over the gate and felt for the latch. There had to be something in the backyard to give him a boost.

Gotta be quiet, Adam cautioned himself. *If her stupid dog gets barking, I'm dead.* The dog was a sixty pound golden Lab named Sherlock, whose bellowing bark would waken the whole house.

In the yard, Adam propped Sue's brother's mountain bike against the fence. It was a stretch getting from the crossbar to the top of the fence, but he made it. Steadying himself with a hand on the side of the house, Adam shuffled toward the roof's edge. The gutter was chest level. From there, the roof slanted upward at a steep angle. Halfway between here and its peak was Sue's bedroom window.

She's probably not even home.

He placed one hand on the roof just above the eaves trough, grabbed the sloping edge with his other hand. It would take a good jump to keep from falling to the concrete path below. There was no count of three, just the thought of looking into Sue's bedroom window. Adam made the leap.

The fence creaked under his weight. That instant in the air, in the dark, he couldn't believe the chance he was taking. He landed on the roof, the edge catching him a few inches below the sternum. Adam pressed his palms against the roughness of the shingles, inching forward. It took some effort, but soon he got his knees onto the roof. He crawled up to Sue's window.

He looked around, at himself on Sue's roof in the middle of the night, the neighborhood asleep, lulled by the song of the crickets. *This is fucking nuts... Well, I'm here now.*

He looked at the window, and saw nothing beyond it. He second guessed himself, wondering if this was actually Sue's room. Adam imagined tapping on the window and Sue's father pushing back the curtain, looking out, squinting and pissed off.

Adam tapped the window. His breathing quickened. No one came.

"Not home," he muttered.

The curtain moved.

A face appeared in the window. Sue.

At first, she looked puzzled, then, recognizing Adam, she smiled. Raised the window. "What are you doing here?" she whispered. "Get in before you fall."

The smell of Sue's bedroom hit him first: perfume, hairspray air, as singularly Sue as her thumbprint. She wore a long T-shirt that came down about mid-thigh. Sue looked tired, but she never looked better to Adam.

"I didn't think you'd be home," he whispered.

"The neighbors complained about a party. I'm grounded for the weekend."

"Shit."

"Where is everybody?"

"Les took out his Mom's car."

Sue's eyes widened. "Yeah?!"

"She's out of town."

Sue narrowed her gaze. "Why're you here?"

"We were all crammed in, Vonda was bitching—"

"Why are you *here*?"

Adam hesitated. "I was near your street..." he trailed off. "I wanted to see you."

"Turn your head," she said.

"What?"

"I'm gonna change."

"Okay," he said, his throat gone dry.

Sue went to her dresser.

Stepping out of Sue's bedroom, Adam heard snoring coming from across the hall. He crept down the stairs behind Sue. Sherlock was nowhere to be seen. A moment later, they were out the front door, walking down the path to the sidewalk.

"You worried about getting caught?" Adam said.

"You heard my dad snoring."

Adam jammed his hands in his pockets. He came all this way and didn't know what to say.

She touched his wrist, pulled his hand from his pocket, and held it. The effect on Adam was seismic.

"Remember what you said that one night?" Sue said.

"What night?"

"When you so totaled."

"I don't know."

"Well, I remember."

"Yeah?"

“Yeah, you said, ‘You’re fucking gorgeous.’” She laughed.

“Oh, that night,” he said, looking away.

“Why’d you say that?”

He stumbled over his words. She giggled. “The guys gave you a hard time, I bet,” she said.

“They were on me all day.”

“Did you mean it?”

“Sure,” he said after a moment.

They came to the unlit grounds of Wilson Park. Sue led him to the jungle gym. A wide slide slanted down from its platform. They sat on the bottom of the slide.

Sue pressed close to him. “How many girls have you been with?” she said.

“I don’t know,” he said. “How many guys’ve you been with?” He wondered if he could handle the answer.

She smiled. “I’m here with *you*.”

He looked at her. Sue was fucking gorgeous.

When they finally kissed it happened as naturally as though they’d dated for weeks. The frenzy of emotions spiraling through Adam dizzied him more than the beer ever had. The feel of Sue’s tongue in his mouth, her breath against the side of his face, her smell, her touch. They lay back on the slide. Adam moved his hand across her slender stomach, cupped her breast. Her hand crawled along his leg, and found the bulge of his erection.

They moved away from the slide, onto the grass. Sue pulled off Adam’s shirt. He looked at her, feeling the night air press against him. He had never done this before. But that didn’t matter, Sue knew what to do.