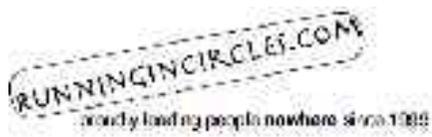


The Few

The Few

Connor Carney



Copyright ©2003-2005 Connor Carney

This is a work of fiction, and as such all characters and events contained within are purely fictional. Any resemblance to real people or events, past or present, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without explicit permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. Explicit permission to use and reproduce the contents of this book under certain circumstances is given in a license found on page 97.

Originally Published 2003-2005 by RunningInCircles.com

“The miracle, or the power, that elevates the few is to be found in their industry, application, and perseverance under the prompting of a brave, determined spirit.”

--Mark Twain

table of contents

Introduction: From “the few” to “The Few”	xi
One: The Gathering of the Few.....	1
Two: The Mob.....	7
Three: Fear of Noise, Fear of Silence.....	13
Four: The Monument.....	21
Five: The Man Edward.....	27
Six: Glass and Dreams.....	33
Seven: The Bakery.....	39
Eight: The Something of Nothing.....	45
Nine: Burning Bread.....	49
Ten: Trial by Fury.....	55
Eleven: In Search Of.....	61
Twelve: Darker Nights.....	73
Thirteen: Finding and Losing.....	81
Fourteen: Story of a Lifetime.....	87
Epilogue.....	93

introduction: from “the few” to “The Few”

The Few first materialized in 1999. At the time, it was a one-page story, written out of boredom in the MS-DOS text editor.

In the original story, a mob of people referred to as “the few” indiscriminately murders another group of people called “the many.” There was no back story, no characters, no dialogue, and no description of the setting.

I got the idea for such a story from the evening news. There was some story on the television about a neighborhood where police were cracking down on crime after a recent crime wave. They interviewed people who all pretty much said the same thing – that the murders had left them afraid and that they were glad that the authorities were trying to do something about it. Similar stories show up on the news fairly often.

But on this particular day, I was trying to think of something to write a story about. I asked a few questions. *What would happen if nobody stopped the killing? How far would it go?*

And I sat down and wrote the story. Writing a story is a good way to spend a lazy afternoon. When I was done, I printed it out, read it a few times, and stuffed it in a desk drawer.

Three years later, I cleaned out my desk.

When I read over the story again, I decided to rewrite it with some real characters, a real plot, and about 20,000 more words. I decided to publish the story in parts on RunningInCircles.com.

One thing I learned from reading serial fiction on other web sites is that it's crucial that the author have the plot written out in advance. Otherwise, you would be tempted to cater to the whims of the audience and the story is likely to disintegrate by the time the end rolls around.

So I sat down, jotted down some phrases from the original story that I wanted to work with, started work on an outline, and went back to asking questions.

One of the most interesting things about releasing a story in sections is that you get to see readers' reactions develop as the story unfolds. Reactions to **The Few** vary, as do reactions to everything: Some people liked the beginning, but hated the end. Some people were cool to the story at first, but then liked the finish. Some people were warm to it beginning to end. (To those people: "Thank you. You're the ones that keep me writing.") A handful of people found it offensive to some particular interest that they have.

Which brings me to another thing I noticed about the reactions, which I suspect are similar to the reactions to most stories – each reader brings his own peculiar baggage to their reading. A couple of more religious readers scoured the story for bible references. Some military buffs interpreted "The Few" as an oblique reference to the Marine Corps. A handful of relics from the Red Scare era interpreted the whole thing as an anti-capitalist screed.

Most of these people were disappointed with the way the story portrayed whatever references they thought they found. Which is odd, because most of those

references were constructed in the readers mind, not mine. How you read **The Few** is mostly your choice.

And, at the most basic level, **The Few** is about choices. The characters make a lot of choices in this story. Before you get started, I'll leave you with one question: *Who makes the best choices?*

I'm not sure I know the answer myself.

Connor Carney
September 12, 2005

one: the gathering of the few

With a creak and a sigh, the sign above the building came an inch closer to crashing down on their heads. Below in the street, the men, women, and children of the society of The Few gathered together in what used to be the thriving downtown of Sidewood. John Echson studied the men around him. He and his family were strangers to these men, the former executives and managers of the abandoned refinery, yet he felt more at ease with these men than with the rough-and-tumble former laborers of the plant.

He had come here for no other reason than to watch them. He had heard things about this place he simply could not believe were true, and when he lost his job at the newspaper, the the writer in him had endowed him with an urgent need to come and see Sidewood for himself.

In an unusually impulsive manner, he had uprooted his family from their home in Portland and driven them all here. Although distracted by the surroundings, he vaguely remembered returning their apartment key to the landlord and driving away with his family across the wilderness of the northwest towards the unknown destination of Ward County.

He had to keep a low profile to avoid being identified among the quiet mob as an outsider. In truth he was an outsider, not merely from another town, but from another world entirely. A world of peace and prosperity. A world where the “civilized” men were civil, not here, going on these escapades through the town to proclaim their supremacy over the former workers, to prove themselves with a few examples of their power, and to become hunters of men.

His mind wandered back to the people he had met when he and his family had first come into town. The children had flocked out of the old, run-down apartment buildings to see the car – a machine that had not been seen in Sidewood since the filling station had closed.

John could not let them know why he was here or who he was with. The upper-class men, it seemed, were less civilized than the very underclass over which they asserted their supremacy. In fact, when the Echsons had first come, they had found no trouble telling everything they knew to the ragged men and women who littered the streets in the decrepit inner city neighborhoods. It was these well dressed, slyly armed men who were now forming their silent mob outside of the Sidewood hunting club that they kept their secrets from. These, it seemed, were the men with whom they would develop their ties. “It’s safer this way,” John thought to himself.

The Few men huddled together in the front of the building, which, despite the mildewed “For Rent” sign hanging in the cracked plate glass window, still housed the headquarters of the Sidewood Hunting Society, a group which proudly called itself “The Few.”

The decrepit building was built like all of the others in the town, although most of them had long since been abandoned. The asphalt of town’s main street was slowly caving into the rusted and collapsing sewer lines underneath it. Lining both sides of the street were cracked, grass-laced sidewalks and first-story storefronts of cracked and dirty plate glass. Above the storefronts, rotting wooden windows peeked out from second- and third-story brick walls.

John carefully and slowly, so as to keep pace with the crowd and thereby avoid drawing attention to himself, inched up to his wife, Wendy, and whispered in her ear, “Don’t Get a Gun.”

Wendy looked through the dirty window into the hunting club, where gun racks held rows of assorted modern and vintage firearms, each meticulously cleaned and maintained, and each bearing a golden property tag hand-engraved with the words “Sidewood Hunting Society.”

She looked at John with an overt defiance. “Are you crazy?” she whispered angrily. “Do you want us to be the only ones without guns in a mob of angry gunmen?”

John looked around to make sure nobody in the group around him was listening. “Yes.” He said quietly.

Wendy stared at him in silence. Finally, she whispered an exasperated reply. “Why?”

John looked down at his hands. “If we have them,” he said in quiet resignation, “I’m afraid we’ll use them.”

To one side of the crowd of mingling adults stood a band of children, ranging in age from the youngest at two, teetering about on the ground with unsure footing, yet as sure of themselves as any of the adults, to the oldest at twelve, listening intently to the adults speak, and anticipating joining the Society after just *one* more birthday.

It was perhaps the children who motivated the adults, albeit through no action of their own. As the children ambled about excitedly, their parents were quietly preparing to demonstrate that, although there was no longer a factory, the hierarchy of the factory’s management was just as important as it had ever been, and the former managers were still the bosses of the former employees.

But that, of course was merely a social distinction. There was no place to work in Sidewood since the plant closed, and even the most qualified could not find another business in or near the town.

When the workers and managers (the distinction still had to be made, even though the true gravity of the titles was gone) stopped making money, they stopped spending, and the stores left. The only buildings on main street not vacated and boarded were the club and the old court building.

The county had long since moved its administrative district to Wardville, about 25 miles south, but the aging Sidewood County Courthouse was still used occasionally when urgent business presented itself that the townspeople could not solve through their own means.

Even in the daylight, Sidewood was gloomy and seemed to be covered perpetually by a thin cloud of dust, smoke, and an occasional burst of lost fumes from the abandoned plant. Now, at dusk, the town seemed downright eerie as those street lamps which had not burned out since the dissolution of the city government popped on and crackled as they cast their dull yellow, flickering light on the street, buildings, and people.

John stood beneath the sign with the crowd, making small talk and trying to fit in while he gathered as much information about the meeting, the group, and the town as he possibly could.

“I don't remember seeing you before,” a man about John's age remarked from behind him. “What did you do over at the plant?”

John spun around. He had heard from several people standing around that “The Few” consisted of the former executives and managers of the plant. Thinking quickly, he tersely answered “Building Manager.” The man to whom he was speaking lifted his chin upwards and grinned, looking at John's forehead over the bridge of his nose. “Ah,” he said artificially, “I see.”

Suddenly, the man caught the glance of an old friend, pushed his way through the crowd, and was gone. John slowly shook his head as he turned away.

John, having seen all of what interested him in the dull conversation leading up to the action, let his attentions drift to the edge of the street, where the children were standing.

Most of them were pushing to peer around the adults at the guns in the Club window. Every so often, one of them would point at one of the weapons and whisper something to the other children, and the children would banter excitedly until another weapon caught their admiration.

Seeking the familiar faces of his own children, John's glance immediately shifted to the edge of the group, where Two of John's children, Mike and Sierra, were standing off to the side of the other children, as was a small boy with black hair and a small face. The three stared quietly at both the children and the adults, trying to internalize the things that were going on around them.

After a few moments, it crossed John's mind that only one of his two sons was standing on the sidelines. Mike's twin brother Eddie had either wandered off or faded into the crowd, and from where he stood, it looked to John as if he might have disappeared completely.

John stood up straight, now focused entirely on the group of children and his missing son. He started to push through the crowd, trying to run, but after a moment he noticed the heads of those around him turning in his direction, their eyes giving away a mixture of suspicion and anger. Finally, afraid of calling any more attention to himself or his family, he slowed down. With his heart beating a rhythm of defiance in his chest, he worked his way through the crowd slowly, finally reaching the curb, where the mass of adults slowly gave way to the mass of children. His eyes darted and searched the band of children for the ten-year-old boy, but he did not catch sight of his son's short, sandy hair or light, patchy face.

Glancing uncomfortably over his shoulder, he noticed a man standing near the front door of the club eyeing him. His agitation was manifested in his involuntary hand-wrenching and the paleness of his skin, in which the leader seemed to be taking great interest.

He took a deep breath to calm himself and took a last look at the band of children. He wanted to avoid attention as much as possible, and he was acutely aware that associating with the two children would draw suspicion to all of them.

6 Connor Carney

After a long pause, he gave up searching and he looked back towards the building. Slowly and deliberately, he meandered back into the crowd.

His agitation remained, both in the continued hand-wrenching and the sudden paleness of his skin as he thought about what might have happened to his lost son, absorbed somehow into that cloud of mindless bodies.

two: the mob

The event began as a plump, middle aged man who was presumably the leader stepped up onto the top step of the Hunting Club entryway and began to address the crowd. He spoke in the manner of a businessman trying unsuccessfully to sound personable during a speech, with a detached friendliness that made the listener feel his feigned sympathy without wanting to continue with a conversation, and a determination in his voice made it clear that there would be no questions.

“You know the drill,” he began. “Those of you that were appointed to lead the lines can start immediately. We’ll be going to Fifth Street, then to Walnut Boulevard, and ending up on Woodwork Drive. I want no casualties this time around.”

He paused a minute before gesturing with his arm and announcing “Let’s Go!”

A few men began to move first, and the rest of the crowd fumbled into a misshapen line behind them. John and Wendy followed awkwardly, not entirely

sure how the event would play out. The group began to move, beginning with a well-paced march, but quickly disintegrating into a disorganized gallop, and finally an all-out run, with the crowd morphing gradually from a line to a shapeless blob as they moved.

The children, intent on being as much a part of the event as possible, clamored into what intended to be a line, but manifested itself as more of a semicircle, and followed as quickly as they could despite the shoving among themselves.

The crowd moved quickly and proudly. John, surrounded by strangers, could not see exactly where they were going or make any sense of what was going on. What he did notice, however, was that none of the men around him had taken the weapons from the Hunting Society building, and he hoped that perhaps these runs weren't as violent as he had been led to believe.

His hopes were dashed as the group, having made the block and returned to the Hunting Club, stopped and cheered fervently as they stormed through the double doors of the building and selected their weapons. He sought out Wendy's face among the strangers and again mouthed "Don't get a Gun." She rolled her eyes at him, but when she came to the gun rack, she hesitated, and after a brief pause, lowered her hand and followed the crowd, weaponless, out into the street. John, also without a weapon, followed her.

As they left the building, the people separated themselves roughly into four lines. John, unfamiliar with the procedure, didn't fall into any of them, and after a moment, he noticed that one of the four lines was forming behind *him*. He panicked and tried, unsuccessfully, to fade back into the crowd, but nobody in his line passed him, and, after a moment, the other three lines began to pull ahead. Desperately, he gave up on obscurity and rushed ahead to join them.

They proceeded down Main Street towards Fifth Street, an old residential district of town where the few small, decrepit wooden houses that remained were

overtaken by shut-down public housing developments, still occupied despite the “No Trespassing” signs plastered on the front windows.

The screaming mob was followed and observed intently by the mass of children, shouting and screaming along with their parents and accenting the sense of discord and chaos surrounding the event.

Standing out among the children screaming for blood were the same three silent ones. If any of the adults had taken interest, or if any of the children had actually known the purpose of these escapades, these three would have been singled out immediately as outsiders.

The one freckle-faced boy searched among the children he was scuttling after for any sign of his twin brother, whom he had seen fade into the crowd earlier. He didn’t see any faces he recognized, though, and eventually he gave up and followed along dejectedly behind the moving crowd.

Suddenly, the well-dressed, plump man who had commanded them on the steps of the Club turned around and made a quick motion with his hand, and the mob stopped at the corner of Fifth and Main.

The children, unaware until too late that the adults had stopped, slammed into the crowd of adults they were following, falling down around each other and taking a number of adults with them. Only the three children in the back remained standing. They, like John, were acutely aware of the things these strangers might be capable of, and at the sight of the falling crowd, they too quickly lay on the ground.

The well-dressed man glanced at his watch and, on cue, the adults and children alike fell silent. The adults stood and the children rustled as they rose to seated positions on the sidewalk. The well dressed man aimed for a window across the corner and shot. At the sound of the gunshot, the mob fell back into their organized lines, only to destroy them at the sound of a second gunshot as they galloped down the street.

To his surprise, John wasn’t really interested in any of the things that were happening. It was his interest that had brought him here in the first place, but now

the curiosity was gone as his mind kept drifting back to his children. Suddenly he regretted bringing them here at all.

As the group ran on, he cast a worried glance back at the kids sitting on the sidewalk. He tried again and failed to locate his own sons and daughter in the crowd before turning forward again and running through the streets with the rest of these madmen.

Soon they approached a lighted building. It was only lighted in the sense that a dim, yellowish candlelight could be seen from a couple of windows, but in comparison to the blackness of the other decrepit developments, it shone like a golden shrine.

As they ran towards the building, gunshots rang out above the deafening screams of the mob and glass shattered in harmony in the background. The mob ran through the now shot-out glass doors and began pounding on the doors of the apartments inside.

They continued the run through the first floor of the sparsely inhabited building until all of the doors were knocked out, then proceeded inside of each apartment, shooting, dismembering or bludgeoning the inhabitants until they had canvassed the entire floor. They shot into space a few times as they proceeded to the stairs to continue their run.

The second-floor experience was much like the first. The excited men and women clamored through the dark, narrow hallway, pounding on doors, breaking into the small, dank apartments, and shooting at close range to kill the expectant yet still fearful inhabitants.

Finally, the building fell quiet. Assuming they had killed all who were present, Sam turned and, standing regally before The Few, took a slow, deep breath that seemed to calm the watching mass of people, and the long, unlit corridor fell silent.

One by one, the people quietly began making their way back to the stairwell to leave, but the silence was interrupted by the sound of a creaking door hinge. All of the eyes simultaneously turned toward the sound, trying to make out the source in the dim light.

The head of a small boy poked out of the frameless doorway, then turned and whispered back into the room: “I think they're gone.”

A second boy, perhaps slightly older than the first, ran out after him. “Don't go out there,” he blurted in a loud raspy whisper.

All at once, a flurry of gunfire erupted in the direction of the two voices. As the bullets perforated the boys' faded t-shirts, leaving behind them the metallic smell of fresh blood, a woman, presumably their mother, dove through the doorway with a piercing shriek. A second flurry of gunfire erupted, and the three lifeless bodies lay relaxedly in a pile of their own blood. At the feat of having killed three of The Others, the crowd stopped for a moment to cheer and congratulate each other before proceeding to the next building.

Several hours later, at five past one by John's watch, they arrived at the corner of Woodwork Drive and Main Street. The crowd stopped and breathed a collective sigh of relief before turning to survey their accomplishment.

Dismembered body parts littered the sidewalk along with a couple of trampled and still-intact corpses of men, women, and children, and the blood and rainwater from the unfolding thundershower mixed where the storm drains were overflowing. As the rain grew harder, the well-dressed man walked over to John with a big smile on his face and, glancing at the mess of bodies, said “We did good.”

Swallowing his remorse for the destruction the group had caused, John paused for a second before replying halfheartedly “Yeah. We did good.”

three: fear of noise, fear of silence

John, Wendy, and the other parents walked together back to the group of children, still sitting where the adults had left them at the corner of fifth street. As the parents, approached, the crowd of seated children stood up, almost as a unit, and scattered towards their parents.

One of the twins ran up to John. He couldn't tell them apart in the dark, and he was not entirely sure to whom he was speaking.

“That was a rush!” he said excitedly. “The way you stormed those buildings and took down those people – it was amazing!”

“No, wait...” John began to reply, but the boy interrupted him.

“Next time I want to come with you,” he said determinately. “I'm almost thirteen – I mean, we could just say I was and they'd believe us, wouldn't they?”

John silently held up his hand for a moment until his son stopped talking. “You will never kill.”

Without allowing another word, walked forward into the crowd to find his other two children.

He pushed his way through the sea of people, in the process noticing that most of the adults and children were practiced enough at this to find each other easily. He, by contrast, searched fruitlessly among the darkened faces until the torrent of families finally began to thin out.

As the last of the families was preparing to leave, he at last caught a glimpse of Sierra and one of the twins sitting dejectedly on the high curb that lined the destitute street, dragging their toes through the blood-laced rainwater as it gradually drained away along the shoulder of the road.

He walked over to them and, reaching down, gently took hold of one arm of each child. Simultaneously, they stood up and walked on either side of him. Glancing around, he caught sight of the figures of both Wendy and the other twin, and the five of them followed the trail of bloody footprints back downtown.

The entire group, adults and children, had reconvened before the Hunting Club building. Feigning interest, John listened to the conversations that ensued.

“A good run tonight,” a man with a gray mustache remarked to a portly gray-haired lady who was presumably his wife.

“It was. One of the best expeditions of the year, I'd say,” she replied.

“What would we do without The Few?” he sighed reflectively.

“We wouldn't survive, I'll tell you that much. And we couldn't do it without Sam. His bravery is just... I don't even have words for it,” the lady gushed.

Turning his attention elsewhere, John caught sight of two young men in a heated argument.

“No we should *not* have raided Blandart Lane!” one of them was yelling at the other. “Nobody lives there but bums. The *real* threats are on Woodwork Drive! Sam knows what he's doing.”

“You know as I do that Blandart is where the real threats are. You and Sam are just afraid to raid the Courtesans' building! If you weren't so selfish, we could do our families some *real* good and raid the people who are actually going to hurt them!”

There was no real sign of the argument coming to any real end until the rest of the people gathered around began to melt into a cascade of thunderous applause.

John moved his head around in an attempt to see what they were all cheering for, and at last caught a glimpse of the same plump man who had addressed the crowd earlier ascending the steps of the club building for another speech.

“Congratulations,” he began, eliciting another round of applause. “What we have accomplished tonight is a great victory for Sidewood.” More applause echoed among the buildings. The cheers seemed to grow louder with each sentence. Stubbornly, John stood in silence through the whole address, unnoticed only because of the mass preoccupation with the man on the steps. He felt an anger building up in his stomach. He knew that an injustice had been committed, and he couldn't help but feel that these men he was standing with, far from being heroes, were the perpetrators of all of it.

At the end of another sentence, the crowd erupted into chants of “Sam! Sam! Sam!” in rhythmic time. Fed up with the entire scene and in the moment not caring if they were noticed, John pushed his way angrily to the far side of the street, grabbing two of his children by the collar as he proceeded. Wendy followed him with a much more discrete demeanor, and the Echsons slipped away down the street.

The four of them returned on foot to their decrepit, ranch-style house on Greenland Avenue, in the heart of one of Sidewood's formerly-nice subdivisions.

Here he lived among most of Sidewood's elite, though at the moment the entire area was virtually deserted, as it's residents were still downtown cheering at Sam's references to the night's atrocities. John made a mental note to return to town to retrieve his remaining son after people began returning home.

When the Echsons had come in from Portland, John had not had any plans at all. As they drove through town, people had emerged from the apartment

buildings to admire the rusted Oldsmobile as it groaned along the rough asphalt. After making a small amount of small talk with the rough-edged apartment-dwellers, an older man had given him an important piece of information.

“Nobody rents them apartments,” he had said in a raspy voice, “The houses neither. Y’just find a place you like an’ settle down”

Just as John had prepared himself to settle in one of the apartment buildings, Sierra had pointed at the gray shingle rooftops in the distance, and John had down the road to the subdivision. Finding a simple house on a street called Greenland Avenue, he drove his car into the narrow carport and began unloading their belongings. After few short conversations with the neighbors, he discovered that the house had been occupied by an older couple who had moved to Atlanta to find work.

The house itself had once been quite nice, though now the tan brick was overgrown with black mold, the roof was streaked and missing shingles, and the yard was overgrown with clover and ivy that was beginning to find it’s way out into the street.

Once home, he could identify the boy he was with as Mike, and called him by name.

Mike turned around and faced him. “Huh,” he grunted in exhaustion.

“How was Eddie tonight?”

Mike wrinkled his nose and squinted his eyes. “He said something about wanting to join the adults.”

John paused for a moment. He started to ask “And how about you?”, but Mike had already darted out of the room. John wandered into the living room, where his daughter Sierra sat in front of the window, playing with the stained, yellowish-white carpet that had made great progress towards coming off of the floor completely, and peering through the torn vinyl curtains at the crowd of blood-stained, cheering people meandering home in the darkness. Sierra looked up at him and said quietly, barely above a whisper, “Why do they do that?”

John closed his eyes and let out a sigh. “Sierra,” he said after a moment’s pause, “don’t worry about what they do.” He couldn’t make himself explain to her what was happening in Sidewood, partly for her own protection, and partly because he wasn’t quite sure himself what made people stay here.

Certainly they could move away and find jobs elsewhere – why the very people who had lived in his house had done just that. But as long as people *were* here, of course, reasons didn’t matter much.

Unsatisfied, Sierra wandered out of the room. John stood for a moment, staring blankly out the window at the crowd, trying to think of some answers to his questions and wearing the same detached, bewildered expression that had been on his daughter’s face a few moments before. Finally, seeing a band of children and parents pass on the street, he snapped back to consciousness and wandered toward the door to collect his remaining son.

He walked outside and down the street, against the grain of the crowd, and towards downtown.

As he walked past The Courtesans’ building, he heard a voice behind him. A tall woman with brown hair and eyes stood behind him, and as he turned around, she stepped toward him.

Despite their name, the courtesans were not actually prostitutes, although they were certainly open to such activities if they would elicit favor from the men who led The Few. But these women uniformly had committed themselves to seducing The Few to maintain their own position in the town’s bizarre social hierarchy, and had, over time, been very successful at it.

This particular courtesan threw an exaggerated smile at John, staring at his pupils with a piercing gaze. “You’re out late,” she said. She paused, waiting for a response, and when she did not get one, she continued speaking. “I saw you were leading the lines. First time in the lead?”

John was a little wary of talking to a Courtesan, but she was the most friendly person he'd met so far in Sidewood. "Yeah," he said after a moment, and then waited another moment before continuing. "I'm John," he said as he held out his hand for a handshake. To his surprise, she stepped beside him and held it. He didn't stop her. She was friendly enough, and he needed the company.

"What brings you this way?" she asked. "I thought everybody went home already."

"I'm looking for my son," John said sullenly. He didn't give any more details, although he thought momentarily about describing him in case perhaps the courtesan knew who he was. But before he said anything else, she interrupted him.

"Oh, the boy down by the courthouse is your son?" she asked with a spike of interest in her voice. John wondered if perhaps he had been speaking his thoughts out loud without realizing it.

"He looks just like you," she gushed.

"Looks can be deceiving," John muttered, and then immediately regretted saying it out loud. Anxious not to say anything else he might regret, he pulled his hand free of hers and ran off towards the courthouse.

Eddie was indeed in front of the courthouse, sitting on the rusted steel support beams of a rotted-out wooden bench, next to a mildewed fountain that had long ago ceased operation, and talking to Sam.

John wanted to find out all he could about the town as quickly as possible, and after the speech he had heard a few hours before, he had a sense that Sam was the man to talk to about it. But right now he was tired. He was afraid that if he questioned Sam tonight, he would say something that would let on his skepticism and blow his cover.

Instead, he hid around the corner and listened to the man and his son throw around comments about The Few. After quite some time of hearing the two heap praise on each other, the conversation broke and Sam stepped into the building for a moment.

Sensing the opportunity, John stepped onto the concrete by the fountain and tapped Eddie on the shoulder. When he turned around, John motioned to him to come, and began leading the way home.

As they walked, Eddie looked up at John and said “You don’t really care about us, do you?”

Taken aback by that bizarre comment, John stopped and stood silently for a moment before replying “I care about you. The rest of this town would be better off in hell.” He said it with a soft but hateful sharpness that left Eddie standing there, almost afraid to follow him the rest of the way home. They walked the rest of the way in silence.

four: the monument

John was awakened the next morning feeling surprisingly rested. For a moment he almost forgot about Sidewood and The Few. He briefly wondered where Wendy had gone, but his thoughts were interrupted when he heard the twins fighting in the next room. Slowly, but with an uncharacteristic happiness, he made his way over to calm them down.

The voices of the two boys grew louder as he got past the door into the short hallway that separated the bedrooms from the living room of the house. John strode to the boys' bedroom door and stood briefly, trying to get a feel for what, exactly would be the best way to placate them.

Unable to understand anything that was going on behind the door, John nudged the door open and slid into the room. He watched them silently, ready to take up sides if he needed to, but willing to just mediate if he didn't. Neither of the boys noticed him, and they continued arguing, as he had tried not to expect, about The Few and the town and the runs and everything else that John hated about Sidewood.

Just by looks, the two were almost identical in every way. Both of the ten-year-old boys were built smallish, with sandy, light brown hair that could look dark or bright depending on how it caught the light.

The only visible difference between them was the barely visible scar on Mike's chin where he had fallen off of his bike a few years back. But despite their similarities, the two boys were about as different as two children could get. Eddie was always the rebellious one, adhering to nobody's standards but his own, and abandoning those even as was convenient, without caring what John or anybody else thought of it. Mike had always adapted to the crowd he was in, obeying and following his parents when they were around, and his friends when they weren't.

But coming to Sidewood had changed something in him. He stuck to John on almost everything, never taking part in the rituals or mingling with the crowd, and, like John, always critical of The Few.

He didn't really want to side with one of his children against the other, but at the same time, he desperately wanted to let them know that the things they had witnessed the night before were wrong. He walked up to the two of them and, without saying a word, he stepped between them. When they continued to yell at each other around him, he spoke.

"Quiet," he calmly interrupted them both midsentence, "The people of this town are killing. Normal people don't kill. Do you understand?"

He looked directly at Eddie when he said this. He knew that it was Eddie who had asked him about joining the runs and that Eddie was the one who had talked to Sam, and he suspected that it was Eddie who would have doubted what he was saying.

As he was finishing his scolding in a scream louder than the argument he had interrupted, Sierra wandered in, sleepy-eyed. She was a few years younger than the twins, with the same light brown hair, and was also built small, although it was a different kind of small that made her simply look younger. She had a sleek, slightly roundish shape to her, which, when combined with her taut complexion, almost gave her the appearance of having not quite enough skin.

She leaned up against her father, who laid his arm down around her neck as she looked up at him, and then back at the twins, who certainly didn't seem to have done anything wrong. John's voice quieted, and he looked at all three of his children in turn and said quietly, "We don't kill." He wrenched his arm free from Sierra's hands, which were holding it protectively to her chest, and walked out.

He walked toward the front door, not telling anybody, perhaps not even knowing, where he was going. Sierra shuffled frantically behind him, afraid of being left alone with the twins in their present state of anger, but John walked out the door and threw it shut in her face before she could quite catch up.

The three children stood silent for a moment after he left. Each of them knew they should say something, but none of them knew what to say. John was not the type of person to leave his children alone, particularly in the current state of Sidewood. The twins, both riled up from their argument, scowled at each other, keeping silent only out of the fear that John might return.

Sierra glanced up at them, afraid to address either of them. Before either one could make eye contact, she quickly turned and looked out the window, where she found herself staring into the eyes of an old man. He had dark brown hair and skin like tanned leather, both of which clashed with his eyes, which were a bright blue. The eyes stared back at Sierra, even brighter than her own, and the shock seemed to make her heart stop in her chest. She knew she should look away, but suddenly she couldn't make herself move.

She thought for a moment of calling for her father, but remembered that he was gone. She thought of calling for her mother, but she too was gone, though Sierra had no idea where. She thought for a moment of calling her brothers, but after the morning's episode, she feared them more than the figure on the other side of the window.

* * *

John proceeded down the crumbling asphalt of Pacific Circle toward the front of the neighborhood. The rising sun shone in his face, and he shielded his eyes to look at the approaching stranger, a man with blue eyes, dull brown hair that

somehow seemed to avoid the sunlight, and skin as thick and as wrinkled as a worn-out baseball glove. Despite his distinctive features, John did not recognize the man, and certainly didn't remember his face from the run the night before. The two men nodded silent greetings to each other as they passed. The man's image stuck in John's head as John continued to amble to the front of the neighborhood.

When he came to the front of the hunting club, John sat on the edge of the fountain and looked dejectedly through the crumbling facade at the patches of ash-gray cinderblock, and thought of the previous evening and the morning's fight.

John had never heard his boys fight before, he realized. Ten years, and he had never once heard them fight with each other. He was certain that they must have fought before, but of course they knew that he had never condoned fighting, and had always kept their quarrels discrete.

He sat there for the better part of an hour before coming to the realization that he had, of course, condoned the fights among the people in the town, and had in fact moved his family across the country from Portland for no other reason than to watch it.

Suddenly, as he sat thinking, he saw the shadow on the building of two people walking up behind him. Turning, his eyes focused loosely on an old man with blue eyes, brown hair, and leathery skin. The man stood there, with a knowing smile, and stopped as John's eyes locked on his. The man glanced down at Sierra, who had walked alongside him, and said with a heavy accent, "Mornin'"

John froze in a mixture of surprise and fear as he placed the faces of the man and child. He stood silently for a moment, his eyes darting between the old stranger and his daughter, almost afraid to ask why they had come.

"Come with me," the old man responded mystically to John's silence. He walked around the side of the hunting club building and into the alley between it and the long-abandoned munitions shop next door. Sierra ran quickly behind him, and John followed closely enough to keep them in sight, but kept enough distance not to seem too eager.

The three of them eventually arrived at a well-landscaped plaza, surrounded by the backs of all of the Main Street buildings. The plaza stood in stark contrast to the rest of the town. It was clean and well kept, and all around it were beautiful murals painted on the backs of the abandoned buildings. The plaza in the courtyard was a bright red brick, rather than the crumbling mosaic of concrete and asphalt that covered the rest of the town, and in the center of the space stood a large monument of an oil well, made of brightly polished brass, mounted on a granite base. The copper nameplate read, “To the people of Sidewood, for making the Sidewood refinery the best in the country. Eastern Oil Company, 1971” Engraved in small letters all around the granite base were the names of the employees of the plant. A stone set in the ground in front of the monument read, “Eastern Oil Park, Established by Sidewood City Council, October 1, 1972.”

John looked up into the old man’s bright blue eyes and asked “Why did you bring me here?”

The old man flashed his knowing smile and replied, “I just thought you might like to know what keeps people here.” After a long pause, he clarified. “This monument is the reason people stay here. This monument has the name of everybody who worked in that plant the year before it closed. Almost all of The Few families have somebody’s name on this stone here.” He pointed to a name and said softly, almost in a whisper, “Here’s mine.”

John leaned over and read the name. Edward J. Pleasant. “You worked in the plant?” he asked.

“Yes,” the old man said after a long pause to look at the ground. “Everybody here did. It was what this town was here for.” Suddenly he moved his finger across the names to one that read “Samuel M. Tartell,” and said quietly, “Here’s Sam.”

Disinterested, John changed the subject back to Edward. “Why aren’t you part of The Few?” John asked, letting his curiosity overcome his fear of being rude.

“I was,” he said, “but then I wouldn’t murder The Others. The Few was about more than just killing people, you know. We just wanted the best for

ourselves, for our families, our children, and when everything fell apart, we had to fight for what we had.” He paused, looking up at the sky for a moment before continuing. “Now they just ignore me. They put up with me, I guess.”

John started to ask another question, but the old man was already beginning to walk away. Sierra was still angry at her father for leaving her behind, and looking back and forth between John and the stranger, she quickly ran off after the old man. When she reached him he stopped, leaned down, and whispered something to her. She looked up at him with a flash of anger before she turned and, looking at the ground, walked as slowly as she could to join her father.

five: the man edward

John smiled down at Sierra. She was staring at the ground, her body rigid, trying as hard as she could to pretend he wasn't there. He patted the back of her head gently and started to walk home. When she didn't follow, he walked back to her, knelt down on the ground, looking up into the child's eyes. He tried to think of something to say, but he kept coming up blank. After a minute or so of staring, she broke the stare and turned her head to the side. John stood up. "Let's go," he commanded as he grabbed his daughter's hand and led her towards the house.

They walked home silently until they turned to walk up Pacific Circle to the house, when Sierra stopped suddenly. She pulled her hand free of John's and began to run off down Exemplary Drive. John ran after her, and although he was not quite able to keep up, he was able to stay close enough behind her to keep her in view.

As they came close to the dead end, where the crumbling street melted into dust and overgrowth, she turned up a driveway and ran up to a small wooden house. Moss-covered vines with brittle brown leaves lined the walls and the yard, although trimmed, was mostly overtaken with patches of clover and dirt. Sierra

bolted to the front door and knocked on it with a vigor that only a child could have. John ran up behind her and put his hand on her shoulder. As the door opened, John looked up to apologize to the owner for the disturbance. Instead, he found himself again at a loss of words, staring into the expectant grin of the old man from the plaza.

“What took you two so long?” he asked in his friendly drawl. He opened the door and motioned for them to come in.

John shook his head. “We were on our way home,” he explained, only slightly out of breath. “Sorry to bother you.” He gripped Sierra’s elbow firmly, careful not to let her run off again, and started to lead her away.

“Come in,” the old man demanded, the grin disappearing from his face momentarily.

Sierra’s elbow pulled on John’s hand and John resigned to follow her inside. They followed slowly into the living room, and at his gesture, sat down on the disintegrating vinyl couch, where, to John’s surprise, Wendy was sitting, reading an old, yellowed newspaper.

The man disappeared into the kitchen for a moment. John looked over at Wendy. “Who is this guy?” he mouthed to her. As she was starting to whisper the words “a neighbor” in reply, the man returned with two cracked plastic cups, each containing a helping of the pale brown liquid that most of Sidewood called water.

He handed the cups to John and Sierra and sat down in the armchair opposite them. He smiled pleasantly and said in a voice that grinned to match his face, “I’m Edward Pleasant.” John vaguely recalled hearing that before, but he was, at the moment, too bewildered to remember much of anything.

“John Echson,” John muttered.

“Whaddaya think of Sidewood so far?” Edward asked in his same grinning voice.

John sat in silence. Of course he hated Sidewood, but he wasn’t about to sit here and tell that to this stranger. Before he could synthesize an acceptable response, Sierra piped in, expressing his thoughts on the town exactly. “I hate it,”

she said. There was no anger or sorrow in her voice, but a sort of emotionless certainty. “It’s even worse than Portland.”

Edward chuckled. “You’ll get used to it,” he assured the three of them. “Once you live here for a while, you’ll get used to it.”

“We don’t live here.” John asserted.

Edward looked up at him with a puzzled expression, and Wendy and Sierra after a momentary silence followed suit. “Where do you live?” he asked with a passive interest. His grin returned and he asked jokingly, “Or are you just here on vacation?”

“We’re from Portland,” John explained. “I’m just here,” He paused for a second. “I’m here on business,” he said.

“You have a house here, don’t you?” Edward smiled. “You spend all of your time here, don’t you?” After a second he added, “It’s nothing to be ashamed of, John. You just need some time to adjust.”

John sighed and leaned back on the exposed foam of the couch’s torn, plush back. He accepted defeat and waited for the rest of his family to tire of listening.

“Sidewood wasn’t always like this. That’s the part I don’t think you understand. Sidewood was a great place. And it will be a great place again. That’s why people are still here. That’s what The Few is about. They just,” he struggled for the words, “don’t know quite how to do it yet. I’ve lived in Sidewood for 57 years, and Sidewood is the most beautiful place in the world. It’s just a shame it doesn’t show it much anymore.” He paused briefly, long enough to collect his thoughts but not long enough to let John or anybody else make a comment.

“I remember back in ‘71,” Edward began what was obviously going to be a long story, “Sam had a party for all of us. He an’ his kids fixed up the courtyard behind the huntin’ club an’ we stayed there all weekend. We went home to sleep Saturday night and after church Sunday mornin’ we went right back out there again. An’ right in the middle of it, Sam climbed up on the card table and started singin’ -- *singin’*.” He gestured wildly with his hands as he emphasized the repeated word. “An’ everybody else sang right along with him. Maybe it was just the beer

up there singin', but when people'd ask him if he knew a song, he'd start singin' it right then, even if he didn't know it, an' we would all start singin' right along, even if we didn't know it. An' the childr'n played together... they had races 'round the block and played ball in the street, and..."

John cleared his throat loudly to interrupt. "Sam," he remarked with a superficial calmness. "You mean the guy who stands on the club steps and tells everyone to shoot people?"

"Uh-huh." Edward nodded dismissively and continued.

"Anyways, Sam's boy Lance came in on Sunday afternoon with a whole crate fulla watermelon, and Sam cut 'em up and gave everybody, even the kids, a full half a melon. And would you believe we still had half the box left over?"

Edward tilted his head slightly and paused for an answer to his question. John, although convinced that Edward was embellishing the story more than a little, nodded silently in the affirmative.

"That's right. An' a couple a' boys started tryin' to play soccer with one of the leftover melons, and every time they went to kick it, it would bust right open, and they would get 'nother one out of the box. An' as it went on, some of the kids from the apartments 'cross the street joined in, an' even some of the adults started playin'. By the end of the day we were all covered in melon juice, but it didn't matter. It was fun."

John let out an involuntary chortle at the absurdly far-fetched story. Edward paused and shot him a good-natured simper before going on.

"That's what Sidewood's about. That was 32 years ago. The plant closed 30 years ago, and a few people left. But the rest of us knew it was worth it and we stayed here, work be damned."

John started to ask for more details, but Edward proceeded with his narrative before he could finish formulating the question.

"And we were all members of the huntin' club -- that was what we did for fun. So we decided we were gonna make things good for our families 'round here. When the old workers started leavin', Sam started callin' us 'The Few,' 'cause we were the few who were stayin'."

“An’ that’s why we’re here. ‘Cause one day we’re gonna have another party like we did back then.”

John looked up at Edward as the old man stood and stared out the window. He imagined the old Sidewood in the stranger’s lucid blue eyes, and imagined the tan, leathery skin soaked in melon juice. He let his thoughts carry him away into the old Sidewood the man had described and for a moment he envied the people of the town who had a history to fight for.

six: glass and dreams

Edward took their empty water cups from them, and John, Wendy, and Sierra stood up to leave. Edward wandered out of the room as they collected each other and made their way through the door and out to the street.

Nobody said anything as the three of them walked down Pacific Circle to their own house. John wandered along dazedly beside the rest of his family, with Edward's image of Sidewood, however exaggerated, stuck firmly in the depths of his mind.

As the three of them walked up the grass-infested concrete path to the door, John heard the twins screaming at each other. He ran up to the house and threw the door open. The two boys pulled away from each other and sat up on the floor. Both of their faces were streaked with each other's blood, and they were both badly cut. They glanced at John, and then at each other, and slowly stood up, trying to pretend as if nothing had happened.

John eyes locked on Eddie. John instinctively suspected Eddie whenever the boys caused trouble. Eddie's more rebellious personality played a part in John's

suspicious, but they had certainly been exaggerated by Eddie's overt admiration for the The Few and their endeavors. Eddie sighed briefly before curling his lips and defiantly looking out the window at the people rushing about in the streets.

Giving up on Eddie, John softened his glare and shifted his eyes to his other son. Mike scowled back at his father for a moment and then muttered, "You moved us to hell."

The tense body turned around and walked out of the room.

Now, with Wendy and Sierra busying themselves at frivolous tasks to avoid the scene, John and Eddie stood facing each other. John's eyes chased Eddie's, but the boy's disconnected stare darted from window to window at the growing, frantic crowd in the street.

Following his son's preoccupied gaze, John glanced through the window at the tumultuous group gathered at the end of Pacific Circle. Some of the more excitable among them were waving their arms, red in the face, while the more composed stood in a tense nervousness.

Maybe they'll finally get what's coming to them," John wondered out loud. Responding to John's rebuke of the group, Eddie crossed his arms in disgust and walked out through the front door to join it. John watched him through the window as he walked over to the rapidly growing crowd of men at the end of the road.

John couldn't hear the conversation that was going on out in the street, but as the men tossed agitated syllables at each other, he watched Eddie's expression cycle through various states of confusion and excitement. After a few moments of trying without success to get the attention of any of the frantic crowd members, the boy turned and ran back to the house.

"The club!" he cried in the same frantic horror as the adults outside. "Everything's gone and we don't know where they are!"

"Who?" John asked in skeptical confusion.

"The Others," Eddie panted.

John followed his son out to the crowd of people, talking, but no more calm or coherent than Eddie. Sam approached John and whispered to him, “Get your family. We’re going downtown.”

John impulsively started to deny it, but his thoughts caught better of it. As far as he could tell, the town divided neatly into two groups. He had made enemies with one of them when he ran with The Few. His consciousness would not let him do anything that might upset this unpredictable and violent crowd as well. At the same time, he was afraid to take his family, especially Mike and Eddie, to another run.

He ambled up the pathway as slowly as he could manage in his state of agitation. He hoped that the crowd would leave without him, but they didn’t. He felt the presence of eyes on him as he plodded sluggishly up the pathway to the front door.

Wendy looked up at him from the couch, where she was reading the same old copy of the Sidewood Times that she had been reading at Edward’s house. John stood there for a minute, not sure how best to corral his family after the recent argument. Sierra peered out of her bedroom door into the living room, overcome by her curiosity about the commotion, and Mike stared through the doorway from his position on the bed, almost daring John to say something to him.

John directed his gaze at Mike, hoping that the other three would listen. “We’re going downtown again.”

Mike looked away. Wendy shook her head and looked back down at her antiquated newspaper. Sierra stared at him in disbelief.

The words he had spoken echoed in his head as he surveyed his family’s reaction. *We’re going downtown again.* He repeated it out loud, toying with the emphasis to mask his doubts. “We’re *going* downtown again.”

This time Mike got up from the bed to throw his door shut and Sierra retreated back into her room to pretend she hadn’t heard. Wendy flicked her eyes toward him for a second and turned the page of the paper.

John glanced outside at the crowd impatiently waiting for him. He sat down on the couch next to Wendy. “Something happened down at the club,” he whispered. A few seconds later Mike and Sierra emerged from their respective doors.

“What happened?” they both asked in unison.

John hesitated. “Someone broke into the club,” he finally said. “and we’re going downtown again.”

The three reluctantly conceded to John and Eddie, and the five of them walked outside to meet the anxiously waiting group of neighbors that was already beginning to edge toward the only occupied storefront on Main Street.

A gasp rippled through the crowd as people came within view of the old building. The twins looked at each other in a shared state of panic. John looked up at the building, and his eyes darted momentarily to the members of his family, and then back up to the building. The facade had been torn from the concrete walls, and profanities had been painted over the entire surface of the building with the bloody overflow from the storm drains.

The plate glass windows had been shattered and the shards stabbed into the carpet that had been pulled up from the floor. The paneling had been pulled from the interior walls and lay loosely over the empty gun racks. All of the weapons were gone.

The crowd grew more panicked as they internalized the situation, and after a lengthy pause for preparation, Sam stepped solemnly and nervously onto the hunting club steps to address them. For the first time in the memory of anyone in the crowd, he spoke softly. “This is an unfortunate turn of events,” he said hesitantly.

The people listening looked at each other as the panicked murmur grew louder. Desperate to find some way to calm them, Sam glanced back at the building, and suddenly regaining his composure shouted fervently, “And this is why

we do what we do!” His voice formed itself into rhythmic syllables. “To keep things like this from happening!”

The beginnings of a cheer were forming in the crowd when a gunshot rang out from one of the vacant buildings across the street. The crowd watched, not quite comprehending, as the bullet tore smoothly through Sam's outer garments. After a few seconds that seemed as though they could have been hours, the charismatic leader collapsed onto the ground with neither a word nor even a glance of surprise.

The crowd scattered briefly, but with nowhere to run and no idea what was happening, they gathered back in front of the hunting club, almost expecting Sam to rise from the pool of blood he lay in to give one of his passionate speeches.

After a moment, the reality of their leader's death settled upon the crowd, and heads turned toward John. An old lady, well dressed and bearing a stately posture walked up to him slowly and whispered, “They want you to speak.”

John looked back at the other members of his family, who, he realized, had slowly scooted backwards through the course of events, and were standing on the opposite sidewalk from the club. The children were staring silently at the blood-stained leader on the club steps, mouths slightly open. Wendy looked at him, and then at the old lady, and then back to him. “They want me to speak,” he mouthed to her. She shrugged indifferently.

Reluctantly, John made his way through the crowd to the front of the defaced building. The empty gun rack caught his eye, and as he turned to face the crowd, he contemplated the irony of being shot with one's own gun. As he opened his mouth, preparing to imitate Sam's lively manner of speaking, a tall, dark female figure emerged from one of the empty buildings across the street. He recognized her as the courtesan as she shot him a brief, conspiratorial smile and headed back towards the complexes.

seven: the bakery

John stared after the Courtesan as she slid a pistol into her pocket and turned a corner out of sight. He stood there for a moment, not sure what to make of it. He looked back at the nervous crowd and tried to think of something to say.

He wanted to say “This is what happens when you kill people,” but thought better of it. He knew they wanted him to say “Let’s kill them,” but he couldn’t. They would have no way of doing it even if he had said that, now that all the guns were gone.

After a minute of staring back at the crowd in silent terror, he bowed his head and stepped down from the steps. “It’s over,” he said, “Let’s go home.”

The crowd looked at him expectantly, waiting for him to say something else. When he didn’t, a voice from the back of the assemblage shouted “Yeah, everybody go home and get your kitchen knives!” The crowd grew excited and erupted into a noise that John thought sounded like a combination of shouting and cheering. Family by family, the audience disbanded and diffused back to the edge of town.

After sharing the initial shock and sadness of Sam's death, John now felt nothing but bitterness as he watched the gleeful and excited people walking off, no less enthusiastic to kill even after seeing the results firsthand.

As the crowd walked off, Wendy walked briskly towards John, who was now seated on the steps. She held the twins firmly by their shoulders as they tried to pull away and follow the crowd. "We'd better go too," she said almost emotionlessly. John nodded as he stood up, and they gradually began to meander back toward the houses.

As the five of them walked slowly, in no particular hurry to rejoin the emboldened crowd, John's thoughts wandered through the possibilities of things he *could* have said that might have stemmed the bloodshed. But if "It's over, let's go home" was taken by the crowd as an incitement to violence, he was at a loss for any words that wouldn't have been.

He bowed his head in resignation, and followed Wendy and the children along the overgrown roads, past the boarded-up buildings, across streets that went nowhere, back to the neighborhood that they shared with the rest of the riotous group.

As they neared the neighborhood, panicked crowd members were running back toward the town. John tried to stop and talk to a few of them, but none of them would stop, and their frantic explanations were no more coherent than the dull roar emanating from the growing torrent of people leaving.

The Echsons slowly worked their way against the crowd until it thinned, and then began the familiar walk up Pacific Circle to the house. As they walked up the pathway to the door, an unkempt man in torn and faded clothed stepped out of the house and blocked their way. If he had any years on John, he didn't have many, but his skin was tanned and calloused, and his hair worn thin and ragged from Sidewood's unforgiving climate, giving him the aura of a man much older.

The man held a clenched fist to John's chest and growled, "This is my house now." The man was a good bit larger than John, and despite John's efforts, he could

not get to the house. After a few minutes of blocking, the man retreated to the porch and grabbed a rifle. The gold property tag gleamed in the evening light. The man fired the rifle into the setting sun, the bullet whizzing over John's shoulder before flying off into the unknown. Defeated, John glanced back at his family and they retreated down the street back to town.

They found the group back at the disheveled hunting club building, where a man in his 30's had taken Sam's place on the steps, screaming curses at the lowlife scum that dared to challenge them and drawing cheers of conjoined anger and excitement from the crowd.

The people were boiling into a fervor that surpassed even that of the runs, but the new leader dared not turn that fervor to action. He could not. Because at the root of the anger and excitement he was building in the crowd was the plain truth that they were powerless to actually do anything.

As the the man on the steps grew tired and began to run short of breath, the cheers of the crowd died down. Murmurs drifted among the crowd as they discussed the new leader's speech, which they found strangely devoid of substance. "He's right," said one man to his wife, "Everything he said was right -- but what are we going to do?"

Succumbing to the requests of the confused crowd, the new leader walked back to the steps. He did not stand on them this time -- he stayed at the base of the steps and said with a false certainty, "We'll set up shop somewhere else. We're going to move to the old bakery building."

Satisfied with this, the crowd proceeded down Main Street to the old bakery building. The building had not been occupied for years, and was only a slight improvement over the destroyed building they were vacating.

The decaying wood face of the building had long since lost most of the white paint that had covered it in years past, and here and there boards had fallen off of the outside walls, exposing cracked, weathered beams and fraying, water-soaked

insulation. The doorway had been boarded over with plywood that had through years of weathering cracked, warped, and come loose, allowing the persistent an easy entrance. The large opening where the storefront window had been was blocked by ceiling beams that had fallen down in front of it.

Once inside, the weather-softened wood floorboards bent and creaked under their feet. The old shop counter had fallen on one end and sat in a gentle slope to the floor, and the shelves that had once displayed baked goods had broken and fallen from the walls, leaving only a pile of wood and metal brackets on the floor. The partition that had once separated the main room from the kitchen had mostly fallen, leaving only the beams from which it had hung. The kitchen equipment was rusted and in some cases nearly disintegrated, and even the old stone wood-burning stove was cracked, with a few stones laying on the floor and the cracked mortar leaving more stones ready to fall at the slightest disturbance.

The people crowded into the building, the floors groaning at the weight, and looked around. They expected the new leader to speak to them, but he wasn't there. The crowd grew restless and upset, and to allay the disaster that could occur if there were to be a panic in this crowded building, John gravitated to one end of the building and started speaking.

"We'll need to stay here," he announced. His mind was racing, trying to come up with something – anything – that would allay the discontent among the tired, angry group of people that was so easily incited to riot. In the end, all he could come up with was a measured explanation. "Now that our homes are taken, we don't have a choice."

The people started talking among themselves and began to grow angry at the sense of discouragement he was creating among them. A few became still and tense with the terror of the truths they were hearing.

He realized he was not helping to prevent a panic, and searched the room for something encouraging to say about the situation. When nothing came to mind he made something up.

“We’ll stay here tonight, and tomorrow we’ll get our homes back!” The crowd cheered, and then relaxed, and John glanced back over at his family. They too were smiling, and as he glanced around at the cheerful faces of optimism he had helped to create, he wished very desperately that the things he had said were true.

eight: the something of nothing

As the light seeping into the old bakery faded, the crowd of occupants gradually drifted to sleep. John and his family had positioned themselves in a corner of the building near the door. As more people fell asleep, the chatter and shuffle subsided, and the building was overcome by an ominous silence.

John stared into the darkness, picturing the crowd in his mind, and seeing on their faces the false comfort he had given them. He tried to think of what he would say tomorrow when it came time to make good on his words.

As the night drew on, the moon lifted up over the building, shining beams of light through the open doorway. He glanced around at the dim faces of the sleeping bodies that were tangled about on the floor, reviving his awareness that he was the only one awake. Silently, he slid along the delicate wood floor to the front of the building, and stepped out into the street.

He walked around the town, following the path they had taken on the run of two nights ago. The bodies of those they had killed had been cleared from the streets and the doorways, though John had no idea to where they had been taken.

The buildings were the same as they had been before, with dim candlelight emanating from a few of the mostly darkened windows. The street, which was in the daytime unspeakably ugly and fearful, felt, under the dim light of the quiet night, peaceful.

Trying not to awaken those that slept or draw the attention of those who did not sleep, John shuffled silently to the door of one of the buildings. He remembered the glass door that had been shot through on the night of the run, and noticed the new wooden door that had been put up in its place. It was the evolution of a tabletop, crafted into a door, trimmed with a meticulous attention to detail, and cut to the door frame with such a precision that only a skilled carpenter could have been responsible. He pushed on the door, and it opened smoothly, on newly oiled hinges. He walked through the building, down the hallways that darkened as he walked farther from the entrance, remembering as he passed each apartment door the people in this very building who had greeted him and his family when they had first arrived in Sidewood.

A sadness ran through him as he thought back to the bakery and the miserable people crowded on the floor of the decrepit building. By comparison, the one- and two-roomed apartments looked wonderful. But his mind told him that he had lost the right to stay here. He had given up that right when he ran with The Few. After a moment of looking longingly around the dark, damp building, he turned and walked slowly back to the entrance.

As he neared the door, a heavily accented voice called his name from behind him. He stopped, and only after a moment turned to face the noise. He stared into a face with old leathery skin and bright blue eyes, and it was only after a moment that he recognized Edward.

“What’re you doin’ here?” he asked in an unnecessarily upbeat tone.

“Couldn’t sleep.” John answered, trying not to start a conversation.

“You think you can sleep any better here?” Edward shot back jokingly.

John paused for a moment. He had nothing to say. Edward filled the space in the conversation: “You can try though. Most’ve the people here are gone.”

Suddenly interested, John spoke back. “Where did they go?” he asked. “There aren’t as many houses as apartments, are there?”

“Course not,” Edward said with certainty, “I don’t know for sure, but I know they’re gone somewhere.”

Steering the conversation to the darker subject that haunted his mind, John spoke quietly: “It looks pretty hopeless. We’ve got nothing but a bunch of hatred, and the ones they hate can kill them.”

Edward chuckled. “That’s the way its been for years. Nothin’ changed tonight but the teams.” As an afterthought he added “And look around. This ain’t hopeless. Not by a long shot.”

Easy for you, John thought. You don’t have to go back and tell them they’re powerless.

He stood up. “I’ve got to get back to the bakery before they wake up,” he said in parting.

“This here’s the best you’re gonna do,” Edward warned him, gesturing with his arms down the building’s long, dark hallway. “Try an’ do more an’ you’ll just get yourself killed.”

John stood there for a moment before muttering a detached “yeah,” and walking out.

As he walked back towards downtown, the sun was drifting up over the horizon, and the sky glowed yellow around the boarded downtown buildings. John walked quickly, hoping to get back to the bakery before people started to awaken.

He stopped for a moment as he heard the sound of an angry crowd. Upset that they had woken while he was out, he let out a long and dejected breath and picked up the pace. The soles of his shoes tapped on the pavement with a quickening beat and then changed as his walk turned into an all-out run. He turned the corner onto Sixth Street without a pause, and ran more and more quickly.

Suddenly, his attention peaked, and he stopped. He wasn’t quite sure, but he held his breath to listen for what he thought he had heard.

In the distance was the painfully familiar sound of screams and gunfire.

nine: burning bread

John stood nervously on the sidewalk outside of the bakery, listening for any sign of what might be happening inside. The unnatural silence made him almost afraid to look in.

Gradually he peered through the doorway at the room, still dark despite the rising sun outside. The room was empty, but as his eyes adjusted to the light, he found the room littered with blood and human flesh, although there were no corpses anywhere to be found.

Fear gripped his body as he searched the building for, if not live bodies, at least bodies of the people who had slept there. He looked around in search of a place where any person might have hidden and been left alive.

He searched under the fallen counter, again finding only remnants of people who had at one time been there. He searched in the decrepit kitchen, looking in the various pieces of rusted equipment for any place that people might have escaped death or capture, and again found nothing. He even looked in the old stove, thinking that perhaps a person could have fit in there if things had gotten desperate, but again John found only pieces of what had once been humans.

He wanted to find anybody who may have still been there, but in so doing, he did not want to arouse the interest of whoever had committed this atrocity. Looking around uncertainly, he called out in a voice that he hoped was just soft enough that it couldn't be heard outside of the building.

“Hello?” There was silence. Not just silence, but an eerie, complete silence that made John whisper to himself just to make sure he hadn't gone deaf.

“Hello?” he called again, a little louder. This time he knew in the back of his mind that nobody would answer, but he still held out a glimmer of hope that he would be proven wrong. He heard a shuffle to the side of the building, and saw a pair of shoes disappear through the window. He ran around to the side of the building to see a human figure disappear into the alleyway.

He darted after the figure into the alley. He could see the shape of a person, but none of the features. John was not in the best of shape, but when he ran his fastest, he kept a formidable pace. Still, the body he was chasing was faster, and no matter how much energy John put into his pursuit, it slipped farther and farther away.

The figure ran sporadically, slowing down for a moment and speeding up again, as if it could not run and breathe at the same time. John would one moment think he was gaining on it, and the next moment would find that it was even farther out of his reach. Finally, the figure turned a corner back toward the road and was lost to John entirely.

Tired and breathing heavily, John walked out to Main Street and sat down on the concrete stoop of an empty building. His eyes searched up and down the line of buildings on the street, each illuminated on its eastern face by the rising sun, and on its western face clinging to the last vestiges of the night.

Finally, when he had come close to catching his breath, he began to search through the buildings one at a time, hoping that somewhere, he might find the people.

In each building, it was the same. Old shops, long abandoned, left vestiges of what they had once been, falling apart in buildings that no longer sheltered them. In each one, the floors were covered by a thick layer of dust and dirt that let John know that no person had been there since it had closed.

Finally, after searching in vain through each building on the block, John let the air from his lungs quietly erupt from his lips and, shoulders sagging, gave up. Discouraged, he returned to the plaza by the disheveled hunting club and sat under the shadows of buildings in the midst of the only nice place in Sidewood.

He sat for only a moment, contemplating the fate of his family, before the sound of an engine caught his ear. He walked briskly out to the road to find an old sedan rumbling down the street.

It was an older car, short and boxy, and covered in an amber brown paint that was worn thin in the areas that collected sunlight, exposing the rust underneath. The engine rumbled loudly, as if to warn others of its approach.

Cars were rare in Sidewood, since there had not been any place to buy gasoline for years, and the sight of a car driving down the street in the middle of this disaster made John surprised and even more worried. The car pulled over the curb into the alley that connected the sunlit street to the shadowed plaza. It nearly hit John head-on before he jumped back around the corner and out of its path.

A large man dressed in black emerged from the driver's door, locked the car and walked out toward the street. He wore a dark black sweater covering a white shirt and dark tie, long black pants starched and pressed until they looked almost like cardboard, and black dress shoes. The entire outfit called even more attention than usual to his frailty. He had wrinkled, pale skin, left soft by years of white-collar work, and his silvery gray hair was left poorly masked by a brown dye.

John watched from the courtyard as the man walked by without even acknowledging John's presence. When he got to the street, he looked both directions and started to go one way, then the other, before he finally turned to John

and asked, in an energetic but aging voice, “You know which way to the courthouse?”

John was surprised by the question, mostly because he did not think the man had noticed him. He ran up until he stood alongside the stranger and pointed in the direction from which the large car had come, down the road that eventually left the town and went toward Wardville. “Over there. It’s the only building with a door.” The two men stood in silence for a moment.

“Judge Palter Fanning” the man finally said, extending his hand for an handshake. As an afterthought, he added “We’re gonna have a trial.”

“What for?” John asked sheepishly.

“Murder. And probably the death penalty. Sidewood always goes for the death penalty.” Judge Palter Fanning got a big grin on his face. “Even when there’s no trial.”

John chuckled self-consciously and looked away.

“And your name?” the judge asked, suddenly serious again.

“John Echson.”

“Oh.” the judge said dryly, and suddenly Judge Palter Fanning turned and walked briskly to the courthouse, leaving John behind.

John stood for a moment before dazedly following the path the judge had taken to the courthouse. When he got there, he stood outside for a moment, listening to the commotion inside, and trying his best to make some kind of inference about what might have been going on inside.

The courthouse building, while not in the best condition, still looked well maintained by comparison to the other buildings around it. He walked inside to find armed members of The Others inside, taking turns shoving his comrades in The Few one by one into the courthouse’s minuscule holding cell.

A young man in his 30’s, who John vaguely remembered from somewhere he couldn’t quite put his finger on, came from the crowd. “Hello,” he said, holding out his hand for a handshake, but not giving a name. Always cautious, John tried

to remember where he had seen the man before. After a moment, he remembered him being with them on the night Sam was shot. John shook his hand.

He wasn't entirely sure what happened after he shook the man's hand. He had been up all night and was tired. But when he was done, he ended up in the holding cell, stuffed full with all of the surviving members of The Few in a cramped, unlit space originally designed to hold only one or two people as they awaited trial.

From his position near the front of the cell, he could catch glimpses of people walking by, although because of the angle he could not identify any of them. He saw a pair of black dress shoes pass briskly along the floor, and heard a clap before a voice John recognized as Judge Palter Fanning began to speak.

“Okay, folks. Let's get started.”

ten: trial by fury

The courthouse's holding cell was crowded to the point that its occupants couldn't really move at all beyond an occasional scratch of the nose.

Initially, John's thoughts centered around his family. Were they alive? Were they in this cell with him? It was crowded enough that they certainly could have been. He tried to push his way through the sea of cellmates, but the mass of people had no room to shift around him, and his shoving was to no avail.

Unable to move, he was not able to seek answers to his question, and he distracted himself by concentrating on the sound of the chaos that surrounded him.

The jumble of words that came from Judge Fanning and the army of self-appointed prosecutors melted into a hollow roar, muffled by the mass of bodies that surrounded and crushed each listener. John stretched his neck up and turned his head to catch glimpses of the scene through the iron bars.

The courthouse had once been a nice building, with marble tiles on the floor and oak trim lining the walls, but, like everything else in Sidewood, it had

decayed through years of neglect into a mere echo of its former self -- a dirty, decrepit monument to greatness lost.

The small lobby which bordered the holding cell had doorways to both the main courtroom and an empty office which, until the building had ceased its regular operation, had been the chamber of the resident judge.

Most of the office's carpet had been pulled up in segments over the years, leaving sweating concrete dotted with unraveled, mildewed threads and rusted carpet tacks.

In most of the lobby and the courtroom, the wax finish that had coated the marble and oak had puckered and washed away through years of weather, and in its place had settled a thin layer of dirt, dampened into a light mud by the condensation from the dank air.

The crowd, which occupied the entire courtroom and most of the lobby, settled down as the judge ascended to the bench. "How many at a time?" he asked, detached from both the excitement of The Others, who stood anxiously to see their nemeses brought to justice, and The Few, despairing in the holding cell.

"How many seats do we have?" a lone voice yelled from the crowd, to a handful of nervous chuckles. The judge, not amused, glanced around at the handful of broken furnishings that littered the otherwise bare room and said nothing. He descended from the bench through the lobby, fumbled with his keys, and finally led the people from the holding cell, one by one, into a mass of people crowded around the defendant's table.

It was only a table in the academic sense, as the wood was close enough to rotten that any amount of weight placed on it would have caused it to collapse. One of the legs had already buckled in the middle, and in place of the lower half was an aged stack of leather-bound volumes from the "Harvard Encyclopedia of Legal Terms, 1928 Edition."

Only about half of the captives could be led to the table at a time, and John remained in the refreshingly less crowded holding cell as those unfortunate enough to have been on the other half of the cell were tried.

The prosecution began as self-appointed litigants listed their grievances against The Few. John could not understand the exact words over the constant cheering and shouting of the trial's audience, but he could identify key phrases:

"Women and Children"

"My best friend"

"Massive property damage"

"Stole our Property"

"Murdered in his home"

"Disregard for Life"

After the initial shock, the long list of crimes grew repetitive, and John's thoughts wandered back to his family. He couldn't see any of them in the group around the table or the cell. Now that he could move around again, he pushed his way through the cell. As he pushed past the people, he looked each one carefully in the eye, trying to identify some of these dirty, disoriented people as his wife and children.

Finally, as he approached the back corner of the cell, he found Eddie, keeping himself busy by etching patterns in the dust that had accumulated on the ground. Eddie abandoned his drawings and embraced his father, who was about to say something when a voice from the front of the cell called back to them:

"It's time for the defense!"

John gripped Eddie's wrist and pulled him as near to the barred front of the holding cell as they could get, and the two peered intermittently between the wall of other bodies as the men spoke up to defend themselves.

John, who wasn't sure what kind defense his comrades could offer, strained to listen, but the words were drowned out by the screams and jeers from the populace of the courtroom.

Because of the number of people, and because there was no direct line of sight from the holding cell into the courtroom, John couldn't tell how the trial ended. He only knew that it began with shouts and ended with gunfire.

He caught glimpses of his friends falling under the shower bullets before a mixed mass of people began to slowly emerge from the courtroom, the people of The Few in a combination of defeat, fear, and anger and the people of The Others in jubilant, victorious cheers.

John couldn't see much through the crowd, but he heard the bullets, and he occasionally caught a glimpse of a person falling from a gunshot wound. Knowing that he and the rest of The Few in the holding cell were next, he looked around frantically for some way to avoid the fate that the less lucky among them had already endured.

Desperately, he charged towards the group of untried Few lining the inside of bars. With each charge, he forced the people nearest the cell opening against the bars. "Pull!" he shouted angrily. He took a deep breath, and contorted his throat to make his voice carry. "I said PULL!" he shouted in a voice deeper and louder than his own. With each shout, a couple more people complied, clinging to the inside of the rusted iron grating that separated the holding cell from the approaching chaos on the other side.

As they clung, their weight pulled at the rusted bolts that held the one-piece iron railing to the wooden ceiling frame. Under the pressure, the bars began to rattle. With this sign of hope, more people attached themselves to the caging, and as they pulled harder and more frantically, the bolts gradually began to pull loose from the rotten wood.

In only a few moments, the bolts stripped concurrently from the wood, and with a sound that was barely audible over the noise of the crowd, one by one fell to the floor.

With the remaining people clinging to the inside, the wall of bars slowly fell outward into the room, making a noise that was a combination of the bars' metallic rattling and the shrieks and groans of the people on whom it had landed.

In response to the sudden commotion, the disintegrating ceiling beams were rearranging themselves, leaving the entire room filled with a white dust. John stood there for a moment, firmly gripping the collar of Eddie's shirt and looking for his wife, other son, and daughter, but the dust in the room burned John's eyes and made it almost impossible to see anything.

Finally, with no other options, he pulled Eddie's collar in the direction in which he vaguely remembered the door to outside. They were having trouble keeping their balance, and they tripped over bars and people as they made their way to the end of the panicked room.

As they neared the edge of the room, they began running into the other people who were also trying frantically to escape. Some of them were armed, and every now and then, one of the people they had bumped into would shoot at them.

Fortunately for the unarmed, the same combination of the dust and the commotion that made it impossible to escape also made it impossible for those with weapons to aim. Each bullet missed his mark, and the two Echsons at last came to the outside wall of the Sidewood Courthouse.

When John's hand found the door frame, he pushed, sometimes violently, through the crowd, no longer caring if he pushed people down in the process. When John's hand found the doorknob, he and Eddie stumbled exhaustedly into the midmorning sunlight, made gray and smoky by the dust and debris from the collapsing courthouse.

Once outside, John scuttled around the corner into the shadow of an alley that separated the courthouse from an abandoned grocery store. Eddie followed, and the two sat on the muddy concrete, frozen by the music of death and chaos and barely able to move.

eleven: in search of...

John and Eddie sat in the alley for nearly half an hour before either of them felt the urge to move. John was the one who decided that they should at least try to look for Wendy, Mike and Sierra, despite Eddie's protests that the other three were dead.

John simply refused to accept that his wife and children may have been killed. When Eddie refused to come, John simply walked off alone. Eddie sat defiantly in the alley and watched his father walk off. A few seconds later, when he realized that there weren't any other real options, he rose reluctantly from the concrete, following John at a distance, while John occasionally looked back to make sure the boy was still there.

As John walked briskly away from the crumbling building, he thought about where to search for his family. He had searched earlier through the empty stores, so he thought it best to begin searching in the old public housing developments that The Others had now vacated. Uncertainly, he walked Main Street towards Fifth,

toward the housing developments that they had attacked what seemed to John to be an eternity ago, but in reality was only a few days.

As they approached the buildings, John stopped and motioned to Eddie to walk alongside him. When Eddie didn't come, John turned around and walked back to him. Eddie just looked at the ground.

John stood beside his son, both of them perfectly still, until Eddie became impatient, and the two of them walked off together to the dark, battle-scarred buildings. When they came to the first one, on the corner of Fifth and Woodwork, they stood quietly, almost reverently in front of these buildings that had seen so many of the killings that they had seen just one of. After a moment, the two took a deep breath and walked in.

The inside halls of the building, although well built, showed many signs of the runs that had taken place there throughout the years. The thick plaster walls were adorned with gunshot marks and blood stains. Ricochet marks lined the floors – a patchwork of cracked tiles, and, in the places where tiles were missing, cement.

Large, solid-wood doors lined the hallway, leading to one- and two-room apartments that the town's desperately poor had lived in, back when the term made any distinction at all.

They passed the old office of the building, which was entirely empty. Patches were missing out of the walls where people had used the plasterboard to repair damages in other places. Since these developments had, in the eyes of the state, been shut down and condemned years ago, there was no use for an office anyway.

As they moved through the building, they pushed open the doors, the latches of which were still broken from some earlier raid on the building, to check each of the rooms for any trace of Wendy, Mike, or Sierra. In each room, they found none.

As they proceeded into the stairwell, they found that the rotten wood of the stair steps simply crumbled under their feet. Determined, they followed the hallway to the other side of the building and tried that stairwell, only to find those stairs also too rotten to climb.

“We can’t get up,” John mused out loud.

“Sure we can, Eddie shot back enthusiastically, climbing the support beams to the top of the steel banister.

As Eddie attempted to climb the handrail, John made the assumption that the other three would not have done such a thing, and left. Eddie, after having slid back down the rail to the floor one too many times, gave up and followed.

The two proceeded back through the building’s main doors to the street. There was no shortage of these buildings, and each one was superficially identical to the next.

They walked up Woodwork drive to the next complex, and as they neared it, the distant sound of commotion inside gave them some measure of hope.

From the outside, it looked just like the one they had just been in, but as they walked in, they saw groups of women milling about and speaking to each other in the halls, which themselves were much cleaner and less damaged than the ones from the previous building.

John tried asking around if anyone had seen any of the three people they were searching for, but most of the people just ignored him and continued their conversations with each other. As he progressed through the halls, he hoped that one of the women in this building might be Wendy.

Finally, as he neared the end of the hall, he saw a woman emerge from one of the doors and turn off around a corner alone. Figuring this was his best chance to find someone who would talk to him, he ran off after her, leaving Eddie running after, falling behind.

When he got within earshot of the woman, he called after her. “Excuse me... Excuse me...”

“Yes?”

She turned around and John found himself staring into a familiar pair of brown eyes. This was the woman who had spoken to him the night of the run.

This was the courtesan.

This was the woman who had killed Sam.

* * *

John stood silent for a moment, letting his mouth hang open. She smiled mischievously.

“Well hello, John!” she let out in a mockingly convivial voice.

He said nothing for a moment, not able to put out of his mind that this person had killed a public figure – even if it was killing that he had been leading in the first place. He wasn’t quite sure what to say, or even if he should say anything at all.

“Hello...” he began, then realized that she had never told him her name. “Hello.”

“It was a shame to see you waste my gift,” she said coyly.

Eddie ran up beside him as he spoke. “Gift?” John screamed incredulously. “What gift? Killing my friend?”

He wasn’t sure it was quite honest to say that Sam was his “friend,” but it certainly made his side of the argument stronger.

“I gave you an opportunity, John,” she said overdramatically, pretending to explain. “I gave you the opportunity to be the leader.”

He took a moment to come up with a response to that one in his head. “Your...” he fought off the urge to curse in front of his son. “Your ‘gift’ almost got me killed!”

She stood calmly, as if she had seen this kind of thing before. “You needed this kind of passion then, John,” she said, her voice moving into a seductive tone as she recited his name for the third time.

Distracted by her antics, aggravated and seeing no possibility of convincing her of anything, he set his mind back to the task at hand, and he turned to walk away.

You're looking for your family, he kept reminding himself. *Remember what you are looking for.*

“Leaving so soon?” she asked softly.

“I’m looking for my wife and children.” he said emotionlessly, and began to walk away.

“Watch for my next gift,” she called after him.

John stopped suddenly. At this point, he really wanted to say something – anything at all – that would phase her, if only for the safety of himself and the people he knew.

He couldn't think of anything to say that was appropriate to his level of emotion, but he knew he had to say something. He turned around and walked back until he stood threateningly close to her. He stood there for a moment, running through the options in his head before he finally said “Keep your gifts to yourself.”

She shrugged and walked away.

Wanting to get out of this building as quickly as possible, John gave up on combing the rooms and walked briskly through the halls, head down, looking for an exit.

As they came outside into what was becoming late afternoon, John began to get discouraged. He stood on the crumbling sidewalk and looked up and down the street at the four- and five-story brick-trimmed concrete buildings that lined both sides of the avenue. His eyes scanned the thousands of rusted aluminum windows that peered from the buildings' stained gray walls.

The people they were looking for could be behind any one of those windows.

Discouraged, John sat down on the curb. Eddie grew restless, sitting by John on the curb, then getting up, walking around a little, then sitting down just to let

John knew he was still there, and standing up again. Eventually, he got tired, and sat down, equally discouraged, next to his father.

The two of them sat in silence for some time before Eddie, staring blankly at the caving storm drain across the pavement, spoke.

“What do we do now?”

John didn’t say anything at first. Finally, he said in a soft, defeated voice, “I don’t know what we do now.”

“So it’s over?”

John bristled at the question, not sure what “it” was. “It may be,” he said finally.

They returned to silence.

After some time, as it began to get dark, John suddenly noticed the soft glow of candlelight emanating from windows in a few of the buildings. It was enough to give him a glimmer of hope, and he stood up abruptly and started walking toward the nearest of the lit buildings. Eddie, who had been about to fall asleep, suddenly came to.

“Where are you going?” he called out.

“Inside,” John replied vaguely. Eddie followed, too tired to protest.

As they approached the building, John recognized the tabletop door from the building they had attacked. He pushed at it, and it opened as smoothly as it had the night before.

Inside, the halls, though empty, were adorned by the indistinct hum of people somewhere nearby. He pushed on a few of the doors, which still refused to latch shut after having been kicked in during the run. After trying a few rooms and finding them empty, he wandered back outside, and stared up at the wall of windows looking out over the street, the abandoned plant, and the town.

Only a few of them radiated the soft candlelight of a tenantry without electricity. He stood and stared at them, figuring out in his head which rooms were lit, and slowly, periodically glancing up to make sure he had counted right.

“There’s only a couple dozen rooms to check,” he said out loud as he passed Eddie, standing by the door. “And only on the first two floors.” Eddie stepped out from the shadow of the building and glanced up at the darkness of the upper levels, then the two walked inside.

As they walked up the pitch-black halls to the rooms that were occupied, the ambient noise from the less-than-soundproof rooms grew louder and louder. Occasionally, they could catch pieces of conversations:

“..but we’re gonna...”

“...and then the tables will...”

“...going to go back and...”

“...nothing I could do...”

“...don’t know where your father is...”

The last one echoed in John’s ears. He ran in the direction he thought it had come from and listened again. At first he heard nothing, but as he listened through the ambient noise, he finally heard a conversation between Wendy and Sierra from behind the door to unit 1165:

“I told you, I think they killed them,” came Wendy’s voice.

Then Sierra with “How do you know for sure? They could be alive.”

“I don’t know for sure, Sierra, but even if they are alive, we don’t have any way to find them.”

He stood there for some time listening to them argue back and forth about whether he was alive or dead before he pushed on the latchless door.

It cracked open with a labored noise and Wendy, who was facing the doorway, suddenly got a blank expression on her face, followed by a overcoming look of relief and suddenly exclaimed “They’re alive!”.

Sierra, now thinking she had won her argument, relaxed in her creaking wooden chair as Wendy jumped up from where she sat atop the room's nonfunctional radiator and ran over to John.

"I thought they must have killed you!" she said breathlessly. "What happened?"

Sierra suddenly turned around. When she saw John in the doorway, her face erupted into a big grin. She shot up out of her chair and ran across the room to John. When she was safely within John's jurisdiction she looked up at her mother with a smug grin and said "I told you."

"How did you get out?" Wendy steered the conversation back to her concern. "We looked around when they came to the bakery and we didn't see any of you."

"I was outside when they came," John explained. If he had wanted to say more, he could have told her that he had been in this very building. He didn't.

"I just hid in the bakery," Eddie said, disinterested in the explanation now that it was over. I climbed out the window after everybody left."

Wendy suddenly looked worried. "You two weren't together, then?"

John and Eddie glanced at each other. "Not until the trial," John said.

All of a sudden Wendy looked upset. "Wait," she said to herself, then paused.

John looked at her and let out an inquisitive hum.

"I know you weren't at the trial."

"We were in the jail cell," Eddie interjected.

"Yeah, so were we, but then..."

"They didn't take everyone into the courtroom," John answered helpfully. He suddenly soured on the idea of explaining everything that had transpired since he had left the bakery. Feigning curiosity, he turned the discussion to Wendy and Sierra's experience.

"What happened to you?"

Wendy looked away. She didn't want to talk about her experience anymore than John did. Sensing the silence, and bubbling with the joy of seeing John and Eddie alive, Sierra was more than happy to fill the void.

"They came in with guns," she started, changing her tone of voice to make it sound even more dramatic than it was. After a moments pause she added as an aside, "I don't think they wanted to kill us, though."

This surprised John, since it seemed to him that "they" wanted nothing at all other than to kill them, but he chose not to interrupt and let her continue with the story.

"Everyone tried to run away or hide or something," she started, then stopped and grinned forwardly. "Well, everybody else but us."

"Sierra!" Wendy burst into the conversation. Turning to John, she said "Yes, of course we tried to get away."

The girl's grin disappeared, and Wendy took up the story. "Anyway, nobody was cooperating, so they started shooting. I don't think they were shooting at a person, just at all of us together."

"They *were* shooting at people," Sierra protested. She turned to John and said "They killed lots of them. Kind of like when we..." she caught herself and stopped, embarrassed that she had almost brought up the topic.

"Kind of like what the hunting club people did," John offered.

"Yeah. Anyway, they told us to go down to the courthouse, but we didn't know where that was so..." In her excitement, her explanation melted into one long, garbled string of words that John couldn't understand at all.

He let her finish the lengthy, unintelligible explanation, then glanced at Wendy for the English version.

Trying to be as concise as she possibly could, she told the rest of the story, staring blankly and emotionlessly into space, with John affirming every few sentences with coaxing syllables of "yeah" and "uh-huh."

"They told everybody to go to the courthouse. Most of us did, but a few people wouldn't go, and they just shot them." She paused for a moment, trying to figure out where to go from there.

“The court was crowded,” she offered. “We really didn’t all fit, but of course that didn’t matter to them. Eventually the judge came and got us, and the defense started talking about all of the things we had done.”

“We didn’t do anything,” John interrupted. “We didn’t even get guns, remember?”

“Right,” she replied. “But everyone else did.”

John was uncomfortable that she didn’t make the distinction between they, who had done nothing but watch, and the people who had actually done the things they were accused of. Too tired to put up an argument, he glanced out the window as she continued.

“Anyway, then they let the people from our side speak.”

“What did they say?” John asked with genuine curiosity. “I can’t imagine how they’d defend themselves.”

“Well, everyone was talking at once so you couldn’t hear much, but it was pretty much self-defense. I mean, they wanted to kill us too, and that they’d tried to kill us before.”

“Then somebody somewhere started shooting and we all panicked and ran away. There was some kind of commotion out in the lobby too, I think, but we didn’t stay around to see it. We just came back here because it seemed like a good place to stay.”

John thought back to their jailbreak, and grinned at Wendy’s description of it as “some kind of commotion.” His mind drifted through the whole episode, from pulling down the bars, to feeling their way out amidst the gunfire, to looking through the dusty buildings for Wendy and Sierra and Mike.

His mind hung on the thought of Mike.

“Mike!” he said out loud. The other three stopped. There was a moment of tensely held silence before Sierra spoke.

“Mike’s probably dead,” she said matter-of-factly. “He likes all of that death stuff.”

“That doesn’t mean he wants to die!” Eddie protested vigorously. “Besides,” he said authoritatively, “he’s not dead.”

“How do you know,” the other three said, almost in unison.

“Well, I don’t know for sure, but I just don’t think...” his voice trailed off.

Suddenly John spoke. “I’m going to find him.” Without waiting for affirmation or protest, he turned abruptly and walked out and down the hall, leaving the other three in a stunned silence.

As he walked out of the building, they stared through the window after him as he walked down the dark street into the night.

“I still think he’s dead,” Sierra articulated proudly.

Nobody said anything else.

twelve: darker nights

John wasn't entirely sure where to look for Mike. His mind was too exhausted to formulate a coherent search plan, and he ended up wandering aimlessly for some time.

As he walked down the dark street, he glanced at the windows of the buildings, where tired occupants were one by one blowing out the candles that dimly lit their mostly glassless windows. Because of the darkness, John conceded that he could not search these buildings tonight, and walked on until he eventually came to the corner of Fifth Street.

Too tired to think of much of anything, he absentmindedly turned left up the once-major road which was now, like most of the streets in Sidewood, overgrown and crumbling.

As he walked along Fifth Street's crumbling sidewalk, he passed the myriad abandoned brick and wooden buildings that stared at him from across the parking lots that lined the street. As he began his journey, he found that most of the buildings had been abandoned for long enough that their once-purpose was no

longer identifiable, but as he progressed farther from the center of the town, he found more recently abandoned buildings, where rings of glue still stuck to the bricks, giving away the letters that had hung from the blackened brick walls in their former lives.

He stopped at each building, hoping to see in its murky shadows the outline of a human, but each building was securely boarded and each lot fenced with razor wire, so that even the most daring human wouldn't have considered stopping here.

As he passed a small house-like building which, according to the glue stains, had once contained the "Meadowland Animal Clinic," the road began to curve gently to the left. He glanced at the houses to his left and right as he walked up the street and, even in the night, it eventually came to him that he was now walking along Pacific Circle.

At this realization he glanced about nervously, afraid that The Others might see and identify him. But he couldn't see any people around and he was certain that, in the darkness, nobody would be able to recognize him anyway, and he continued to walk forward into the neighborhood where he and The Few had once lived.

He continued to meander up the street until he was at the corner of Exemplary Drive, where he heard a rustling sound. He looked up the street and saw the figure of a person at the dead end, peering at him intently from the porch of an old house.

John turned and walked about halfway down Exemplary Drive and looked more closely at the person staring at him, hoping that the figure on the porch was his lost son. When the figure stepped down from the porch onto the overgrown front lawn, however, John saw that it was definitely too large to be that of a twelve-year-old.

A pang of panic went through his stomach as he realized that it might be one of The Others, and he turned his face away, hoping that the figure wouldn't recognize him.

“John?” an old, heavily accented voice called softly from the void.

“Yeah.” John said. He spoke in a voice not quite his own, just to make sure that nobody around could recognize him by his voice.

“Come in.”

John just stood there, not wanting to give himself up just yet.

“Edward.” the voice confirmed, just to let John know he wasn’t someone to be afraid of.

Slowly, John walked the rest of the way to the dead end and up to the porch of the house, stopping for a moment when Edward was clearly in his range of vision, just to make sure he wasn’t being ambushed.

“Most of ‘em are still down at the courthouse,” Edward mentioned as he walked up and stood beside John at the porch.

John let the night’s silence speak for his indifference, and the two men stood tensely for some time.

“I’m looking for my son, John finally explained.

“Which one?”

“Mike,” John said. “If he’s still alive,” he added after a moment. He threw himself down on a wooden crate, breathing heavily. He realized that he had just admitted that his son could be dead.

Edward chuckled. “I think he’ll be okay. The people here may have some things wrong, but they ain’t monsters. They’ve been through this kinda thing before an’ they’re okay.”

John’s eyebrows bent up at Edward’s statement. “All those people we...” he stopped and corrected himself. “All those people they killed, though. I was there. Nobody but monsters could...” His voice trailed off.

“Revenge, John.” The tone of his voice let on the grin that was masked by the night. “They all want the revenge. But that’s not all that’s in ‘em. There’s more to it, I think.”

John suddenly got bitter. “It’s all I want to see.” He got up from the crate and stormed off back toward the town. He muttered to himself as he passed the run-down buildings, about the people on both sides of the guns, about his own

damned curiosity that had brought him here in the first place, and about Edward, the near stranger who utterly failed to take any of it seriously.

When he got back to Fifth Street, with the very beginning of dawn creeping up on the town, John began to look more closely at the fenced-off, boarded buildings, seeing acutely every small opening and bent wire. If anybody could get into those buildings, Mike could.

He stopped and stared at the building he was standing in front of. The fading remnants of the sign were illegible, but he could tell from the construction that it had once been a warehouse of some kind. He studied the wire that surrounded the building, looking for any sign that his son might have snuck inside. The wire fence was only continuous along the street, and if he had managed to get through somewhere along the perimeter, he would have been able to get into any of the fenced-off buildings fairly easily.

The purplish light revealed broken or bent wires in a few places, where a person who didn't mind a few scratches could have snuck in, although they were more likely the paths of small animals than of people.

Desperate to find his son alive by any means necessary, John didn't care about likelihoods. He lay on the ground and managed to squeeze under the fence while getting cut only a couple of times. He brushed the mud out of his wounds and hurried across the crumbling asphalt parking lot to the building.

The rectangular building was about 30 feet tall and made of corroded steel and rusted aluminum. The bottom of each outside wall was covered in brick from the ground to about six feet high. The hollow metal doors that had once secured the old warehouse now blew open and shut at the whim of the light morning breeze, driving echoing, metallic roars through the damp air.

He walked timorously into the warehouse. It was completely dark except for the dim light of dawn shining through the several sets of doors on the four large, barren walls. The building was completely empty, with bare walls, high ceilings,

and a bare concrete floor, and even his lightest steps echoed through the building with a disconcerting volume.

Each of the doors was opening and closing lazily in the wind, and the building cycled between reasonably well-lit and pitch-black with no particular rhythm. With each darkening, John's steps slowed, and he walked more carefully, afraid of running into something he hadn't seen in the dim light of the moment before, and slowly, he moved across the damp concrete floor.

He finally made his way across the warehouse, to the doors that faced away from the street. These doors faced the rising sun in the east, and the morning sunlight shone around him into the building, allowing him to look over the entire space.

He stood for a while, surveying the warehouse for any place where a young boy might hide. He could see every wall and corner in the giant rectangular building, and he finally decided that the giant building really was empty, and moved on to look for his son elsewhere.

As he moved out of the building into sunlight, he found himself in an industrial establishment of some kind. The area was littered with rusted metal-faced buildings, pipelines, and intimidating steel structures that John couldn't identify. Throughout the area ran cracked concrete roadways, just wide enough for a delivery truck, and years of rain washing over the rusted metal that surrounded them had left the once-white concrete stained with reddish-brown streaks.

To John's left were the industrial buildings, attached to various pieces of derelict steel equipment, and to his right were the offices – two and three story brick-faced buildings much like those on Main Street, with large now-unglassed windows which overlooked the industrial area, so that the managers and executives could overlook the operation.

He moved to one of the larger buildings. It looked very much like the other buildings. It had several small smokestacks emerging from the roof, and several of the pipelines that ran around the premises ran through the walls, although it was impossible to tell which ones ran into the building and which ran out.

This building was one of the few which still had intact doors on the front which, of course, were locked. John pulled at the handles, and even kicked at the doors a couple of times before he gave up on this building and followed the corroded, tar-stained pipes to the next one.

The building he came to was a small one, more sturdy and probably newer than the others around. While it too was marred by the same rust that covered everything else, it, unlike the others, had only patches near the ground, where the runoff from the roof had collected against the walls.

The doors to this building were open and badly damaged, as though someone had at some point forced their way inside. As he pulled one of them open, it scraped against the ground, letting out a grinding noise loud enough that it seemed to echo back from the edges of the earth.

He stepped inside the building, which still contained quite a bit of the old machinery. The pipes ran across the building from east to west, splitting in the middle to make room for several pieces of equipment along each one. There were several “stations” along the pipes, each with innumerable valves and levers that had once been operated by the plant’s laborers.

Each station bore a placard, now covered over with dirt and corrosion, but which had once shown the name of the person who had worked there. John walked over to one of the stations, and tried to imagine the people of Sidewood, whose work at this very plant had once sustained the entire town.

His mind wandered on to the state of the town today, with the blue-collar workers from stations like this and the white-collar managers from the buildings across the road killing each other daily as *The Others* and *The Few*, respectively.

He wiped the back of his hand against one of the placards, revealing letters that could just barely be made out:

“Eastern Oil Company; Edward J. Pleasant”

John frowned. *Edward was one of The Others*, he thought suddenly. He briskly walked over to the next station and rubbed the dirt from the placard. “Samuel M. Tartell.”

John's curiosity took hold of him, and for quite some time he walked from station to station and building to building, finding the names of The Few, and even forgetting for a while that he was looking for Mike.

* * *

When he came back to the realization that he still hadn't found the boy, John abandoned his curiosity and started looking for a way out of the plant. He really didn't want to go through the warehouse again, even in the brighter light of midmorning. He instead followed the cracked concrete road away from the warehouse, past several other buildings, finally crossing an orphaned piece of railroad track and coming back to a major street, where a sign still bore remnants of paint that had once said "Eastern Oil Co."

Disoriented from the winding paths inside of the gates, John wasn't quite sure which street this was or which way he should turn. He looked up and down the street for a clue, but didn't see anything he recognized. Finally, for lack of any better option, he turned to his left and began walking, hoping that he was going in a direction that would take him to his lost son.

After quite some distance, the rusted fence surrounding the plant ended. As the road continued, it became lined more and more densely with buildings on either side, and it eventually ended at an intersection with Main Street.

The street signs that had once marked this intersection were missing, so John looked up and down the street to orient himself. He could tell he was near the east end of town, and to his right the buildings were already fading into the dense wilderness that separated Sidewood from the other towns around it.

To his left, some distance down the road, there was a group of people milling around in the street. He approached it slowly, not sure if the people there were friendly or hostile. He stayed in the shadows of the buildings as he slowly and quietly approached.

When he got close enough, he saw the face of the middle-aged man he had shaken hands with in the courthouse the day before. Recognizing him as one of

The Others, John started to turn away and look elsewhere, but the sound of laughter caught his ear.

He turned around and his eyes scanned the crowd frantically.

He was certain recognized his son's laughter.

thirteen: finding and losing

John's eyes perused the hostile crowd of Others, celebrating their victory in front of the courthouse, looking for the source of the laughter he had heard. His eyes first found a small boy with dark black hair and a round face, and lingered there for a moment before another round of excited laughter filled the air, and his eyes drifted to the profiled face of his lost son.

Mike was talking to the man in his 30's. The same man who had gotten them all into the bakery. The same man who had put them all into the holding cell in the courthouse. The same man who John was finally beginning to realize was a leader of The Others.

The world seemed to blur around him, and for a while the voices of the crowd faded into a single dull roar. Taking a deep breath, he tried to concentrate only on the conversation involving Mike. Slowly, he regained his focus, and the noise seemed to subside as he eavesdropped from the shadows.

The first line he caught was from the man. “Things are looking up, you know,” the man said. His voice was articulated and his speech methodical and practiced; although he was certain that had heard this man speak before, John was still surprised by the sound.

The man continued. “Now that we don’t have to worry about the killings anymore, we can finally live in peace.”

Mike responded excitedly. “I’m just glad we don’t have to do any more of this killing stuff.”

The other man cleared his throat quickly. “Well, right.” After a moment he added, “But we’ll have our justice first, of course.”

There was a tense silence for a moment before Mike replied absentmindedly, “Oh... right, of course.”

The man didn’t say anything else, and eventually the two drifted back into the crowd and joining other conversations. John stayed in the shadows and listened to variations on the same conversation between Mike and no fewer than a dozen strangers, waiting for the opportunity to quietly reclaim the boy and go back to the apartment. John bubbled with frustration, both at Mike’s acceptance of these people who had tried to kill them and at his own inability to intervene.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the crowd began to fade, the people, illuminated by the evening sun, wandering back to the houses where John and his cohorts had lived only a couple of days before. Mike sighed and sat down on the steps of an empty building, letting the excitement and frustration mix behind his expressionless face.

When the street grew silent, John slowly stood up from where he had squatted on the ground to watch and listen. He felt a little lightheaded, and he didn’t fully trust his cramped legs to get him all the way across the street. It wasn’t until a few minutes later, when the pain of standing had finally worn off, that he ambled out of the alley and across the street.

“Mike,” he called out softly but commandingly as he came close. Mike looked up briefly, but then looked away again. When he looked back up, John gave him an accusatory glance and said in a low voice, “Those people tried to kill us.”

Mike said nothing. Avoiding silence, John continued, rambling for lack of anything constructive to say. “They are murderers. They killed our friends, and they won’t mind killing you either if they get the chance!” While he was speaking, he became aware that his voice was growing louder, faltering only when he came to the word “friends.” He was sure that he didn’t consider The Few to be his friends, but it certainly made his point stronger.

Mike stood up. His eyes flamed with anger as he screamed. “You’re any different?” Mike went on with his tirade, and as John stared at him, he briefly felt as though he were staring up at the screaming child rather than down.

“What about the killing?” Mike went on. “Did you forget that? Did you forget *why we came here in the first place?*”

“No!” John interrupted, upset at the accusations and every bit as inflamed as the boy. “I didn’t do any of those things. I was watching; *I didn’t do anything.*”

“Uh-huh,” Mike grunted dismissively.

John looked around. He was agitated and trying desperately to come up with a convincing argument in his favor. Finally, he looked back at the boy and spoke in a retaliatory tone, “You don’t have to believe me.” Not able to leave the conversation at that, he quickly added, “But it’s true.”

Mike rolled his eyes and looked off at the steps of one of the buildings, saying nothing.

The conversation was over. John was ready to take the boy home, but the remaining tension kept the two of them standing in angry silence for quite some time.

It was Mike who finally broke the silence. Turning to walk back to the housing complexes, he said coldly, “Let’s *go*, dad.”

At the sound of the word “dad,” a face appeared around the corner of one of the doorways lining the street. John instantly recognized the man. He still did not know his name, but John had seen him enough times now to know that he meant trouble.

He darted for the shadow of a building, pulling Mike along by the shoulder, but in the daylight the shadows were little protection. The man's bayoneted, double barreled rifle, an intricate, decorative, collector's piece that Sam had once used to fire the ceremonial first shots of their midnight raids, shot several rounds at them, each one missing, but nonetheless driving them farther into the middle of the street.

For the leader of such violence as he was, the man was a fairly poor shot, and the antiquated weapon wasn't helping his aim. As the rounds hit the pavement at their feet or burrowed themselves in the soft brick walls behind them, the two labored to get away from the gunfire. Ultimately, they only found themselves being driven back towards the shooter's side of the street.

After several minutes of dodging the seemingly endless supply of ammunition, they found themselves backed against the courthouse wall, a mere ten feet from the door from which the man had emerged. Together they cringed in anticipation of their impending gunshot wounds.

But the final shot did not come. Instead, the tired but pleased shooter stepped down onto the sidewalk and approached them, wearing a smug grin on his bony face.

Standing with his toes only inches from John's, the rifle thrown casually over his shoulder, the man let out a condescending chuckle. In a hoarse, raspy voice, he spoke barely above a whisper.

“John Echson,” he said as his grin grew wider, his thin, purplish lips contrasting with his pale, coarse skin. “Remember a few days ago?” He motioned with the rifle to the hunting club. “Remember when you stood on those steps and told the crowd to get their kitchen knives?” He shot a sly glance at Mike, remembering his earlier words of praise and hoping for a response that would

reveal the boy's true loyalties. Mike stood unresponsive, giving no cues. He only stared blankly at the cloud of dust swirling in the air behind the man's wiry frame.

Getting no response from the boy, the man turned back to John with a lucid, maniacal glow in his eyes. "Sent the boy in as a spy?" Before John had a chance to answer, the man answered his own question. "Sent the boy in as a spy." he said sharply as he thrust the end of the bayoneted rifle at Mike's gut. The end of the blade, which had been blunted for safety quite some time ago, shuddered as it tore roughly through the boy's t-shirt and skin. Once the skin was pierced, the rest of the foot long metal slab slid smoothly through the child's intestines with a single, quick thrust, barely drawing blood.

With the sound of Mike's short, sharp scream, John lunged at the man out of reflex. Quickly and abruptly jumping out of John's way, the man lifted the boy up on the end of the gun barrel as John tripped over the street's high curb and fell to the ground. The barrel and blade bent slightly under the boy's weight until his flesh tore free from it, and with a loud thump and a puff of dust from the dirty sidewalk, the lifeless body fell to the ground, now bleeding profusely from the newly released wound. Dropping the weapon at the feet of the small corpse, the man calmly walked off through one of the alleys.

Rising from the ground with a comparatively small measure of pain, John wandered over to where the limp body lay in a brownish-red mixture of dirt and blood.

John stood silently above the scene, staring down at the body which had once contained his son, and his body crouched slowly to the ground beside it. With each moment that he stared, he felt a potent combination of anger and sorrow begin to rise within him, and, perhaps for the first time, he truly understood the motivations of The Few he had come here to watch.

The silence of the evening seemed to mourn with him, calming his anger and allowing the sorrow alone to consume him. In the final hours of dusk, he picked up the body and carried it over his shoulder back to his remaining family members.

John approached the moonlit building with some trepidation. Thoughts raced through his mind – how would his wife and children react? Would they blame him for the death? What would the other people in the building think as he carried the corpse through the corridor? He had a sudden urge to abandon the body, but he quickly scolded himself for even thinking such a thing.

Instead, he stood outside in the darkness, staring at the building and pondering the same handful of questions endlessly. Finally, he grew tired and sat down on the steps. In time, he leaned back against the mildewed brick behind him and fell into a restless sleep.

fourteen: story of a lifetime

John woke with the sunrise, no more confident or less restless than he had been the night before. He looked at the body beside him, looking more and more lifeless every minute, and wished he had taken it inside under the cover of the night.

He picked it up cautiously, afraid it might break, and carried it through the halls to the room he had left two nights ago. He nudged open the door to find Wendy, Eddie, and Sierra still asleep in their meager accommodations. He set Mike down just inside the door and moved across the room to a small wooden chair, where he sat and waited for them to wake up.

Eddie was the first to wake up. He sat up slowly, disfigured his face and commented loudly on the stale smell. Wendy and Sierra, roused by the noise, also noticed the smell and looked inquiringly at John. John looked solemnly back at the body by the door, and the room fell silent. The looks on the three faces were identical – horror stricken, but at the same time not particularly surprised.

Wendy looked back at John with a sharp anger in her eyes. “Well?” she said coldly, “You brought us here. What do you have to say?”

John looked around for some kind of support from one of his other children, but they had both moved silently to the corner, as far away from the day-old corpse as they could get.

John could think of nothing to say. He wasn't sure what he wanted to happen next. A part of him wanted revenge, to stay in Sidewood and see The Few back to the top to kill those who had killed his boy. Another part of him wanted to get out of Sidewood and make sure that nothing like this ever happened again.

His glance shifted from face to face among his wife and children. Finally, he snapped to a decision. *I cannot abandon the living for the dead.* The phrase came into his consciousness suddenly, and he repeated it silently to himself several times. Finally, rising from the chair, he spoke.

“We're going back to Portland.”

The two children's eyes lit up, and Wendy let out a sigh of relief. *This is what they wanted all along*, he realized now for the first time.

He looked around, as if there were some sort of business to take care of in Sidewood before they left. Their car was still at the house that had been taken from them, and even if they could get to it, it didn't have enough gasoline to get them out of town. They had no belongings. Everything they owned had been assumed by The Others who now occupied the sleepy neighborhood on the edge of town.

John picked up his jacket, pulling from the pocket the crumpled manuscripts the he had written after the first of the runs. He grinned slightly as he read over them. They had been written a confused tone that seemed completely foreign to him now. He sat back down in the chair and stared at the ceiling, trying to remember back to his decision to come to Sidewood in the first place.

He had a vague memory of his last day at the newspaper office, and as he tried to remember the details, he slowly regained clarity. The editor, a portly, jovial man of about fifty whom the reporters called Vince and the copy editors called Mr.

Ariccino, had come in late that morning, uncharacteristically drearily. He had put on a forced grin and lumbered into his office, while John and the other junior reporters took a brief moment to glance at him, and then at each other, before going back to their task of writing the day's mundane news articles.

John shuffled through the stack of printed pages sitting on his desk. A relatively normal news brief from the wire service:

WARDVILLE — A CONVENIENCE STORE SECURITY GUARD IN WARD COUNTY IDENTIFIED A SUSPECTED LEADER OF A SIDWOOD PARAMILITARY GROUP. SIDWOOD, AN ABANDONED CITY ONCE HOME TO THE EASTERN OIL COMPANY'S LARGEST U.S. REFINERY, HAS BEEN PLAGUED BY VIOLENCE SINCE THE CLOSURE OF THE PLANT IN 1973.

He perked up at reading the story. It would be an ideal “Human Interest” piece: poverty, violence, sympathy, morbid curiosity – everything a story needed to grab the attention of the reader. If only the paper could send someone to Sidwood, he was certain that the story would be a huge hit, perhaps getting him a bonus, and possibly even a promotion, in the process.

He grabbed the page and ran to the slightly ajar wooden door marked “EDITOR.” He tapped on the door a few times as he gently nudged it open, holding the printed brief in the air. “Vince,” he said breathlessly.

Before he could continue, Vince Ariccino looked up from his desk and said slowly, “Oh, John, I need to talk to you. You know I just came back from that meeting with the bigwigs in New York? Well, they want to move the paper office up there; combine them with a bunch of their other papers.”

“Oh?” John asked, surprised. “When do we move?”

Vince shook his head. “See, the thing is, they already have a bunch of reporters up there. National reporters; they write stuff for papers all over the country. We can keep a few people from this office to do the local stuff, but only, you know, the *senior* reporters.” He paused briefly. “They're already working on tomorrow's edition.”

And that was that. John was out of a job, and there wasn't even anybody to protest to. Just some corporate board up in New York. “But this story!” he panted vainly to the detached editor, “this Sidwood place – it's the perfect story! You're going to tell me you're going to pass up this story?”

“Sidewood?” Vince asked with the edge of a grin on his face. “We’ve tried that one before. Twice. We sent the reporters down there, and they’d come back with nothing. Sorry, John. I can’t keep you. It’s not my decision to make.” He handed John his last pay check for four hundred and forty three dollars and twenty cents and said goodbye.

And on that note John Echson, unemployed, walked down the stairs to his car, and drove home to his apartment. When he got upstairs and saw the rent bill posted on the door for five hundred fifty dollars, he looked down at his half-month’s pay check and groaned. They were going to have to move.

In that instant, John decided that if he was going to move, he might as well go to Sidewood and write his killer piece himself. Once it was written and ready to show, someone would pick it up. He was sure of it.

And so, in an uncharacteristically bold move, John Echson walked into his apartment for the last time, looked around at his wife, his two sons and his daughter, and told them what had happened and what they were going to do.

“We’re moving to Sidewood.”

Today, John looked around the dimly lit single-room housing unit in the condemned building and for the first time consciously regretted that choice. He stuffed the papers back into his pocket and walked out into the hallway.

He walked briskly down the hallway, but the rest of his family did not immediately follow. They were staring intently at the pale and blood-spattered corpse of Mike.

“John.” Wendy spoke solemnly and commandingly, looking away from John’s figure receding down the dim hallway. He slowed his pace gradually, finally coming to a stop and turning around to face his family from the far end of the hallway, his features eclipsed by the dull yellow light that shone in from the perforated front wall of the complex.

She looked up at John’s dark figure. “We can’t just leave him here.” she called out, glancing back down at the remains of the boy that lay at her feet in the doorway of the room.

John looked down at his shirt, drizzled with deep red stains from when he had carried the body home the night before. He looked up, eyes slightly out of focus, and said calmly, "I can." He waited for a moment of silence before he tried to explain himself. "He's dead, Wendy. We're alive, at least for now." He shifted his glance slightly to address all three of them. "We can leave, or you can stay here and die. It's up to you."

John turned around and walked outside. As Eddie and Sierra ran off to follow him, Wendy quietly sat down on the dusty concrete floor next to her son and closed her eyes. "Goodbye, John" she whispered.

* * *

John walked briskly through the heavy morning air to Main Street, his children running after him, struggling to keep up. When he finally stopped, just around the corner from the old club, the children caught up with him, panting and gasping for breath.

The three of them looked out at the crowd of Others gathered around the building of the Hunting Society building. A small group of people were working to lay down the old carpet that had been torn up in the raid. Another group was coming across the street with a large piece of plate glass taken from one of the other buildings. A third group was working diligently to clean the mildew from the building's front wall and steps.

Shortly afterward, the man who had killed Mike stepped up onto the newly cleaned stoop of the building, and the crowd stopped their work and gathered in front of him.

"You know the drill," the man began. "Those of you that were appointed to lead the lines can start immediately. We'll be going to Eighth Street, then to Meadow Street, and ending up on Blandart Lane. I want no casualties this time around."

He paused a minute before gesturing with his arm and announcing "Let's Go!"

As the crowd began to arm themselves and proceed out into the streets, John shoved himself and his children into one of the dark storefronts that lined Main Street. He waited until the sound of clamor died down before treading cautiously out onto the sidewalk, followed closely by the children. The three of them strode hurriedly to the edge of town before they were accosted by Edward. He stood expectantly on the sidewalk before them, accompanied by a young boy with black hair and a small face, who was looking up admiringly at the old man.

“Where are you folks going in such a hurry?” he asked with a grin on his face.

John replied detachedly. “We're leaving. Going back home.”

Edward's face became serious. “Leaving?” He paused for a moment, then became sympathetic. “Yeah,” he said contemplatively, “It's probably better that you go ahead and leave.” He got a mischievous smile on his face. “You just can't understand what drives people here, can you? You never really appreciated the story behind this town.”

“I don't understand the story?” John snapped. Pulling the crumpled pages from his jacket pocket and stuffing them into Edward's hand, he looked the aged figure sullenly and said “I wrote it.”

With those as his last words, he grabbed his children by the wrist, and the three figures walked off down the road out of town, hoping that somehow they could find their way to Wardville.

Edward looked down at his protégé standing next to him, then looked back up at the receding figures and called out only half-jokingly, “Are you coming back for the 'Happily Ever After?’”

epilogue

Forty-seven years after John Echson left Sidewood, a man with a small face stood behind a ribbon at the Sidewood Armaments Company. He had black hair and skin like tanned leather, both of which clashed with his eyes, which were a bright blue.

As he faced the crowd of people that stood before him, he flipped through a stack of papers that he was holding in his hand. “On this day,” he proclaimed as he wielded a giant pair of scissors, “we celebrate the opening of the Sidewood Armaments Company's third building. Fifty years ago, this was nothing but an abandoned oil plant in a ramshackle town. Look at how far we have come!”

He opened the decorative scissors and ceremoniously cut the ribbon that blocked the door to the building. In the past, it had been a dingy control center for some oil pipelines. Now, completely remodeled, it was nothing less than a state of the art facility for the manufacture of Gunpowder. As the man walked into the brightly lit building, he glanced up at a picture of his grandfather hanging on the

wall. Underneath the picture was a golden placard that bore the name “Edward J. Pleasant.”

After a moment, he turned again to face the plant employees. “On this occasion,” he announced formally, “I would also like to recognize the retirement of one of our most distinguished employees.” He grinned down at an old lady with curly white hair and loose, wrinkled skin. “Miss Wendy Echson has been with this company since the beginning.” He reached over to one of the many tables that had been set up for the occasion and picked up a gold-faced wooden plaque. Wendy Echson, for everything you have done over the years for this company and this town, thank you.” His words of praise for her melted together as he rambled on about her spectacular work over the years and the high esteem in which she was held. Finally, he reached the end of his speech. “You've done so much to create, in the words of my grandfather, and our founder, our own 'happily ever after.’”

The crowd burst into applause, too absorbed with the speaker to notice that Wendy wasn't even paying attention. She was staring off into space, daydreaming about three people to whom she'd whispered “Goodbye” so many years ago.

**** The End ****