

A

Self-Made

Monster

A Novel

Steven D. Vivian

***Other Boson Books by Steven Vivian***

*Flunky*

*Prelude to Hemlock*

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**A Self-Made Monster**  
by  
**Steve Vivian**

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**For Theresa Vivian**

**Many thanks to Nancy M.**

# Chapter One: A Monster, Half-Made

He lit his cigarette and tossed the spent match into his mouth, as a child tosses a peanut. The sulfur tasted good, and the Dunhill was a fine chaser.

The night was cold, but he did not button his jacket. He smiled as the students walked by in groups of two or three, their breath rising like puffs of steam. He suppressed a chuckle. He imagined the kids chancing to see him pressed against the cold brick of the library. They might be startled, might even drop their books and spiral notepads. But they did not see him, crouched ten feet away behind the shrubs. They hurried to their dorms and apartments. Tonight was Friday, and the parties had already started.

Above him, the library lights were being turned off. One by one, the windows went black. He enjoyed the steadiness with which the windows blackened. In a few minutes, he would walk with the same steadiness as he followed his victim. His victim would not see him standing ten feet away behind the shrub. The victim would not hear the steps ten yards behind, then five yards, then one.

The library parking lot was normally brightly lit, but not tonight. The maintenance crew had not yet replaced the lamps. Still, Lori was not worried. Like other Tailor coeds, she had walked hundreds of times, day and night, across campus.

She opened the car door, tossed the books into the back, and dropped into the driver's seat. The car door resisted her pull.

He gripped the top of the door. "Move over."

"Where are you taking me?" She did not recognize the gravel road and flanking cornfields. Old houses and leaning barns were bluish-black silhouettes in the moonlight.

"Do you have any cigarettes?" he asked.

"I don't smoke."

He laughed. "They're bad for you, right?"

She nodded.

"They're good for me."

After ten minutes of silence and three more old barns, she gathered the nerve to study him. "I thought you were somebody I knew—" She cursed herself. If he thinks I know him, she thought, he might kill me.

"You probably do. I'm a professor at the college."

"You didn't tell me where we were going."

He faced her. The dashboard lights made his face a faint green. "I didn't tell you because we aren't going anywhere. I am going home soon. You are not." He said something more, but she did not hear him. She heard only her heart, amplified to a deafening volume.

"It's surprising," he remarked, "how quiet my victims get. Must be disbelief, yes?"

She seized the wheel and yanked. The car swerved to the right. Professor Alex Resartus yanked the wheel to the left, but too late. The car careened into the ditch. The dashboard hurtled toward Lori's face and struck her.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Alex complained. “Goddammit, the noise might have startled the farmers.” He rolled down the car window, heard the hissing radiator and a distant bark.

“Let go of my hand,” Lori pleaded. Alex had grabbed her left wrist when Lori seized the wheel, and he would not let go.

“You’re bleeding,” he accused. “Goddammit it you’re bleeding!”

He reached into his jacket pocket as if to give Lori a tissue, but instead revealed a carving knife. The blade gleamed, and Lori now saw that Alex wore latex gloves.

“Don’t cut me, don’t cut me, don’t—” She jerked her arm, trying to free herself from his grip. A second jerk propelled pain through her wrist and up her arm to her shoulder. But she was free.

Lori tried to open the door. It was locked. Her now free left arm reached for the door lock, but she could not grip it.

Her hand was gone.

Alex held her severed hand away from his lap, so the blood would not stain his trousers.

“You cut me, you cut me, you—”

Alex gripped her neck and yanked. The dashboard hurtled forward again, striking her over and over. Each strike left more blood on the dashboard. Between my bloody nose and bloody wrist, she thought, I won’t have any blood left. She wondered if she should ask the professor to stop hitting her with the dashboard, but she did not have time. Her neck was being twisted, and now the steering wheel column hurtled toward her.

He wiped blood from the steering wheel and dashboard; he licked all the blood off the latex gloves and stuffed the gloves into his packet. He made a quick inventory: cigarettes, matches, knife. He had everything. He had to be careful because his memory was getting worse. But tonight had been easy.

He pulled a packet of cocaine from his pocket, opened it, and spilled the powder into the back seat. A nice little red herring. He walked into the cornfield, gathered himself, and began running.

Alex got home at 11:30. He had covered five miles in thirty minutes. He tuned his radio to the all-news station. No word of a tragic accident on county road 14.

The campus would be teeming with talk of the tragedy on Monday. A few friends would feel shock and grief; most of the victim’s acquaintances would feign grief and revel in the exciting mystery: why was she murdered? Who killed her? A drug dealer? A drug crazed hitch hiker? Was she raped first? The autopsy would show that the victim had not snorted cocaine, but the cocaine in the back seat would inspire various drug theories. And the students would exchange gossip and theories ceaselessly between classes, during parties, and as foreplay.

Alex stood absolutely still in the middle of his living room, his senses on high alert. No discernible change. Satisfied, he walked to the living room window and pulled back the curtain. He could still clearly see his mailbox, twenty five feet away, at the end of his driveway under a street lamp. So far, so good. The student’s blood had not harmed his vision or hearing.

Nine years ago, Alex had murdered a dozing near-sighted truck driver at a rest stop. Alex did not notice the driver’s thick bifocals. Within the hour, Alex’s vision

beyond forty feet was negligible.

Alex now walked to the bathroom, where he leaned forward and studied his reflection in the vanity mirror. His eyes were still blue, and his hair still nearly black. The darker hair was a relatively new feature. One night, Alex took a long drive and discovered a subdivision under development. Only the streets, sidewalks, and basements were completed. A jogger came loping down the street. The jogger was in his mid-twenties, six foot two, with his black hair in a virile ponytail.

As the jogger approached, Alex swung open his car door, and the jogger collided with the door. Alex stepped out of the car and told the jogger to be more careful. The jogger jumped to his feet and punched Alex five times. When the jogger paused, Alex slapped him. The jogger rolled like a felled bowling pin and struck a fire hydrant.

Alex dragged the jogger behind a house, cut his throat, and filled an empty water jug. When he was done, Alex used the jogger's shirt sleeve to wipe his bloody mouth and chin. Before leaving, he stuffed a newspaper clipping into the jogger's throat wound. The clipping described the satanic ritual slayings of cows, goats, and a tax attorney in Los Angeles.

In one sense, the jogger had the last laugh. Within two hours, Alex's light brown hair had turned nearly black. Fortunately, the change occurred during summer vacation. When fall classes started, Alex explained that a newly prescribed ulcer medicine had changed his hair color.

Such superficial changes were only an irritation. The internal changes were more serious. Alex sometimes half seriously wondered if a victim had suffered from Alzheimer's. His memory and his concentration, once useful for weeks at a time, had worsened.

Until tonight, Alex had avoided Tailor College students. But he reasoned that college students were usually healthy, which lessened the chance of bad blood. Tonight's blood seemed fine, and he celebrated with another Dunhill.

## Chapter Two: Murder, It's Intense

"Did you hear about the murder?" Jimmy Stubbs filled Holly Dish's glass with more beer.

"Something about it." She took a swig, licked away the foam mustache.

"It's intense," Jimmy promised. He scooted closer to Holly on the couch and shouted over the rock music. "Her feet and hands were cut off."

Bob Beck appeared. "Great party for a Sunday." Bob was the fraternity president, and he gauged his fraternity's popularity by the size and racket of its parties. Tonight, about forty students lounged in the living room, enjoying the free beer and loud music. Bob now sat next to Holly and asked about Holly's roommate.

"Kris is kind of a bitch," Holly lied.

"Living with somebody," Bob cautioned, "you always see them at their worst." Bob hoped that Kris would show up tonight, but he was not optimistic, as the time was already 10:30.

"She is too a bitch," Jimmy agreed, though he barely knew her. His declaration made Holly smile. The smile encouraged him, so he repeated himself. I'm on a roll, Jimmy thought. Jimmy resumed his gossip about the murder.

As he talked, Holly paid reasonable attention, only occasionally looking away, waving at friends, or suddenly declaring, "God, I just love this song!" After praising a group—"The Hiss is so great!" or "Five Fingers On One Head is so great!"—Holly shut her eyes and gyrated to the beat. After thirty or forty seconds of gyrating, Holly swigged some beer and nodded for Jimmy to continue with the story.

Jimmy soon ran out of information about the murder, so he told the story again, but discretely exaggerated some details for dramatic effect.

"Her head was cut off?" Holly stuck her tongue out in disgust. "What an ordeal. You know that's wild. We read a story about a guy's head getting popped off in Resartus's class."

"What, you read horror stories in there?"

"No. It's Modern British lit. The story is *The Prussian Officer*, or maybe *The Russian Officer*. Something about, uh, about Russia."

"Sounds good." Jimmy knew nothing about literature, so he did not know what else to say.

"No, it was boring. But the guy's head did pop off. It was symbolism, or a symbolic head." She paused, waiting for the next song. She frowned. "That song is boring. Hey, I'm out of beer."

Jimmy refilled her glass.

"Thanks," she smiled.

She smiled at me! Jimmy realized. And he felt that awkward lust, his penis swelling and his palms itching. She's perfect for me, Jimmy thought. At feet seven inches, she was only seven inches taller than Jimmy. Her nipples, Jimmy thought, were in easy reach of his mouth.

Jimmy was summoning the courage to ask Holly for a date when she whistled

across the room to a friend. "See ya, Jimmy. Thanks for the beer." She rose without looking at him.

Jimmy cursed under his breath. At least she had sat with him for half an hour. Jimmy watched her disappear into a circle of students passing around a joint.

He *had* to spool her.

That's it, Jimmy promised himself. Tomorrow he would transfer into Holly's literature class. He would be a week behind and he hated to read, but he would be able to see Holly every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Professor Alex Resartus leaned against the lectern. "I forget. What was your homework for today?"

"Nothing," a couple students said.

"Not exactly. 'Nothing' is what you got out of your homework." He snapped his fingers. "I remember. It was to start *Lady Chatterly's Lover*. More from our friend D. H. Lawrence." He glanced at his notes. "Now. What do you make of the gentleman in the wheel chair?"

Jimmy hid in a back corner. He did not speak or move. He hoped that by remaining still, like a hunted deer, the professor would not call on him. Unfortunately, Jimmy was the second student called upon.

"I'm new in the class," he complained.

"Your excuse is old." Alex resented students who showed up a week late without announcement.

"And your name is Mr...?"

"Stubbs."

"Stubbs." Alex smiled. Perfect for the little smart ass, Alex thought. Sitting there in studied indifference, arms folded across his chest. "Stubbs," he repeated loudly.

Jimmy instantly hated the professor. The professor wore tinted glasses and battered cotton slacks. Maybe he's an old hippie, Jimmy guessed. Although he had never met a hippie, Jimmy hated them. Jimmy next noticed that the professor wore scuffed wingtips. Jimmy concluded that Resartus simply couldn't dress.

The professor also yawned, smoked, frowned, and forgot questions in mid-sentence. Worst of all, Jimmy could not understand a single thing the professor said. Metafiction? Mythic archetypes? Marxist subtext? For Christ's sake, Jimmy thought, he's just talking about a stupid story.

The class got worse. At one point, the professor forgot the year *Lady Chatterly* was published.

A student with a pasty complexion instantly raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr..." The professor shrugged amiably. "Your name...?"

"Edward Head." Edward enunciated each syllable precisely, hoping the professor would remember. Edward pushed a greasy bang of black hair from his forehead. "*Lady Chatterly's Lover* was published in 1928. It was a private edition."

Alex raised his eyebrows at this fact, one of many that he had forgotten. "That's right."

"An expurgated edition was put out in London in 1933. No, that's '32."

"That's very good."

"The complete edition," Edward continued, "wasn't brought out until 1960. That didn't do much good for Lawrence, 'cause he died in 1930."

The students shifted in their chairs, offended by Edward's knowledge. Several glanced at their watches. Jimmy cradled his chin in one palm and discreetly extended the hand's middle finger at the know it all.

After Alex dismissed class, Edward approached the professor's desk.

"Yes, Mr..."

"Mr. Head."

"Right."

"I wanted—I'd like to tell you that I really liked *The Best Year of His Life*."

Alex considered Edward anew. Not many students knew about his writing.

"I think it's really great. I took your class because of it." Edward's voice lowered, as if confiding a secret to a lover. "I found it in a book sale this summer—really, it's one of the best books I've ever read."

"Thanks." Alex lit a Dunhill, grinned through the smoke. He almost ate the match, then thought better of it. "That's quite a compliment. I do appreciate it," Alex lied. He was beyond caring about *The Best Year of His Life*.

"If you don't mind me asking—?"

Alex smiled patiently.

"Well, why do you write? I mean, what's your motive?"

Nobody had asked that question in years. "I write for..." Alex gathered his thoughts. "...for the same reason I read. A desire to be elsewhere."

"Huh...you mean, someplace other from here? At Tailor?"

"No, not Tailor specifically. Just to be...elsewhere."

"What about your other novels?"

Alex removed his glasses and rubbed his hollowed, blood-shot eyes. "There are no others."

"But that one is worth ten bad ones, I mean ordinary ones."

"Thanks. Nice of you to remember."

Jimmy caught up with Holly in the hallway.

"I didn't know you were going to take this class," Holly said.

"My advisor told me I should take it for humanities credit. Is it tough?"

"I can't tell yet. What did you think?"

"I don't like the professor much."

"I've heard he's OK. Just all over the road. Did you know he's a writer?"

"Really?" Jimmy tried to sound interested. Before Holly had a chance to continue, Jimmy suggested they get a coffee at the student union. Holly agreed.

Jimmy discovered that besides talking about rock music and beer, Holly enjoyed talking about money. After graduation, she explained, she was moving to New York City to work in publishing. She hoped to be an agent. Agents, she said breathlessly, get up to fifteen percent of an author's earnings.

"That's why I'm in professor Resartus's class," she said. "He might have connections. If I do OK in his class, I hope he writes a recommendation."

"What kind of stuff does he write?"

"I don't know. Some sort of, of writing."

Talk turned to Resartus's assignments. Holly placed the class syllabus on the table. Jimmy pretended to study the syllabus and managed to move his chair closer to Holly's. Being short could be good sometimes, he told himself. From the corner of his

eye, he could study the heft of Holly's breasts.

An erection forced him to reposition himself. He turned his head, pretended to cough, and repositioned himself a second time.

"This syllabus doesn't look too bad," he said casually. "I think that—" He swore. Holly was three tables over, talking to Edward Know It All.

# Chapter Three: The Dead Too Have Hopes

Alex worked in his office until the sun was safely in the distant west. He put on his sunglasses, got a cigarette, and walked to his car. Thank hobbled Jesus, Alex thought, it's only February.

He dreaded each spring because spring brought summer. Summer sun was the most dangerous. During the summer, he waited until dusk to come outside. He wore sunglasses, a hat, gloves, and a jacket with a full collar. Heavy clothing looked odd in July, so he said that he had suffered melanoma as a child. Winter sun was the least dangerous: he could go outside in the late afternoon if he wore sunglasses and dressed carefully.

But noon was always dangerous. Even the noon sun of December raised gelatinous blisters the size of fried eggs. And high noon in July! The thought appalled him. Alex would smoke and pop, like an insect trapped under a cruel child's magnifying glass.

At home, Alex searched through his dozens of bookcases and found a copy of *The Best Year of His Life*. The novel covered one year in the life of Eric, a surgeon. In the course of the year, Eric slips and falls on his wife while performing the Heimlich; her skull is split and she dies in the ambulance. Some months later, Eric's mother goes into insulin shock and dies on his operating table as he performs a biopsy. The mayor's daughter, awaiting a tracheotomy, dies of anaphylactic shock caused by anesthesia. Meanwhile, Eric's former girlfriend Happy threatens to sue for child support payments. Eric believes the child is his, but he is too distracted by his ruined career to communicate with her.

Eric's faith in medicine is ruined, and he even avoids seeing a dentist about a toothache. The toothache worsens. In drunken despair, Eric pulls the offending tooth, using only channel locks, oil of clove, and Old Bushmill's.

After pulling the tooth, Eric calls Happy and proposes a scheme. The scheme is complicated, Happy is not bright, and Eric must often pause to hold an ice bag to his mouth. But he finally manages to explain the scheme: Eric will perform needless exploratory heart surgery. Happy will file a malpractice suit, win, and the two will flee to Cancun.

The scheme succeeds, although Eric must bribe a colleague to testify against him in court. Eric and Happy flee with \$2,000,000 to Cancun. Eric, Happy, and their child operate a hotel on the beach. Eric acts as the hotel's beachside bartender and off-hours dentist.

Several strips of transparent tape on the novel's dust jacket had turned yellow and brittle. Alex smiled at the reviews on the back:

"The finest example of black humor of the season. Horrific laughter, not mere bitterness!"-*The New York Times*

"Mr. Resartus's first novel blasts off and never falters. He is now the young

member of that old fraternity of such writers as Heller, Donleavy, Stewart, and Southern, writers who kept black humor alive even as the uncertain new millennium waited patiently.”-*The Fresno Bee*.

“Nobody in recent years has so effectively wedded a pessimistic outlook with a comic technique.”-*The Chicago Tribune*.

As he read the reviews, Alex tried to recall the promise his career once held. His family predicted fame and fortune. Alex fended off such talk, but hoped they were correct. The fact that Alex suffered from schizophrenia, the publisher hoped, might provide invaluable extra publicity. “You could be the next big thing, a real idiot savant!” his agent enthused. “Hard to buy that kind of publicity!” But *The Best Year of His Life* bombed. Alex’s only royalty check, \$788, mocked his hopes. He urged his publisher to promote the book more, but the publisher replied that the book was dead.

Dead, just like his brother David.

David, a physician, was murdered in an emergency room six months after Alex’s novel was published. Alex happened to be with David that day, but he remembered only fleeting details: David yelling for help. Blood on the floor, on the ceiling, on hands and faces and white jackets. Somebody who was hurt or demented sitting beside Alex and laughing, blood spilling from his mouth as his laughter grew hysterical.

Alex often tried to recall that day, but the details eluded him. Alex simply knew that he improved that day: no more anxieties, no more depression, no more David. And a new therapy—human blood—replaced David’s drug therapy.

“Psychiatrists really are quacks,” David often said while giving Alex another psychoactive cocktail: various mixtures of lithium, trazodone, and haloperidol. “Freud’s primitive psychoanalysis is still polluting modern medicine. Analyzing dreams, for Christ’s sake! But don’t worry, Alex. Drugs will eradicate all mental illness in the 21st century.”

Alex smiled weakly. “Well we’re almost there.”

“That’s the spirit!” And so Alex’s already brittle psyche was strained, whipped, and pureed by David’s reckless drug therapy.

When David was murdered, Alex feared the novel was jinxed. David’s murder naturally dampened the family enthusiasm for Alex’s novel. And besides, mom and dad confessed the day after the funeral that they did not like *The Best Year of His Life*. “It’s kind of depressing,” his mom complained. When the novel died almost simultaneously with David, Alex hated David even more. At least he’s dead now, Alex often told himself.

Alex used his novel’s good reviews and the embers of his literary reputation to get a job at Tailor. Tailor was in the middle of Illinois, close enough for excursions into Chicago and St. Louis. And the surrounding dozing towns contained plenty of potential victims.

The literary world forgot Alex. His schizophrenia, and his tendency to assume victims’ traits, often left him severely disorganized. He could not develop his ideas. Now he sat at his kitchen table, staring at his copy of *The Best Year of His Life*.

If I could just concentrate, just remember things, Alex mused, I could write another novel.

## Chapter Four: Plans

Edward Head lived two miles from campus in a bungalow that was converted into two apartments. Edward lived in the basement apartment and filled his time there studying, listening to CD's, and tinkering with videotape equipment and hidden microphones. Jill and Cheryl, two coeds, lived in the apartment above him. On occasion, he used tiny microphones to spy on the coeds. Recently, the coeds had not provided much entertainment. They had stopped seeing their boyfriends and killed time with TV and arguments about bathroom rights.

Tonight, Edward enjoyed his latest hobby: videotaped movies. He turned off the lights, drew the curtains, and loaded the VCR with his newest tape: *Under the Big Top*. Light from the screen flickered across his face, and he smiled. The first image was promising:

A stained leather tarp. On the tarp, a nude woman with a green Mohawk stiff enough to be a broomhead is on her hands and knees. A male voice commands, "Turn around, Blinkey."

Blinkey faces the camera. She is in white face. Black greasepaint is smeared on her mouth, and red ovals highlight her cheekbones. A hand appears, places a cigarette in her mouth, lights the cigarette. Blinkey takes a long drag, then a second. Smoke rushes out of her flared nostrils. She nods.

The hand removes the cigarette. "Now it's Corkey's turn," a male voice announces.

The production quality of the video is low. When Blinkey looks up, the harsh lighting turns Blinkey's pockmarks into little craters.

Now a long shot of Blinkey, and the surroundings are clear: Blinkey is inside a circus tent. A male clown approaches from behind. He has a white face, fixed red smile, and maniacally raised eyebrows. He is removing his green suspenders. As he gets closer, he unzips his fly.

Now a close up. On the right of the screen, Blinkey's face in profile. On the left, an erect penis painted as a candy cane, white with red stripes. Blinkey closes her eyes and opens her mouth.

Edward was rubbing his crotch when the phone rang. He tried to ignore the interruption, but the mood was ruined and he turned off the VCR.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Edward? This is Holly Dish. I'm in the lit class."

Well come on over, Edward thought to himself. He looked at his crotch. I've got a surprise for you.

Holly did not invite herself over. She simply asked if Edward had taken notes from the day's class. Edward said he did take notes, but he could recite Resartus's lecture without consulting them.

"We didn't get through much," Edward reminded her. He outlined the use of symbol in *Lady Chatterly's Lover*: the impotent husband in a wheelchair, the restless wife, the simple, passionate groundskeeper. Edward talked twenty minutes without stopping.

Holly's hand was cramping from taking notes. "I need someone like you." A pause. "To take notes. Thanks again."

"Good night."

Edward did not start the tape. The sobering glare of the flickering fluorescent kitchen light made him feel foolish.

He wondered if Holly was actually interested in him, but skepticism chased the thought away. No, Edward decided, Holly Dish simply wanted notes. True, she had talked with him today in the cafeteria. She was friendly enough, but was simply killing time.

Edward imagined Holly starring in *Under The Big Top*. She sits on the tarp and pulls off a tee shirt. Next she lies back, pulls down her zipper, and shimmies out of her jeans. Her thighs are oiled, cabled. Her rib cage promises power and excitement, like a sports car's grille. She pulls on yellow clown shoes; they are flat and wide, like the blade of an oar.

Her thighs squeeze and chafe Edward's face. The clown shoes oscillate.

Edward's pants were already off. He flipped the light switch, sprinted into the living room, and restarted the tape.

Comfortable in a gray Taylor College sweatsuit, Holly Dish lounged on her bed, reading the latest issue of *Me, Myself, and I*. The feature article exhorted her to "take charge of your own life and the lives of others around you!"

Holly accepted the article's thesis. As the article advised, Holly was planning her career and "taking the steps that make women winners!" Her phone call to Edward Head had been one such step. With careful teasing—"I need someone like you"—Edward would provide notes throughout the semester. Edward's notes greatly improved Resartus's lectures: they filled in the gaps, made transitions between points, and removed the tangents.

With such fine notes, Holly's chances of passing Resartus's class increased. True, she hated to read anything but magazines. But as the career articles declared, "You can't make it to the fast track with a short cut!" Holly resigned herself to try reading most of her homework.

If her plan worked, Resartus might reward her with a "B" (an "A" seemed impossible) along with a letter of recommendation. Resartus's would be the fourth such letter. The previous three had come from Holly's advisor, her gym teacher, and her freshman dorm director.

Holly's advisor, Dr. Blake, learned that Holly was in Alex Resartus's class.

"Professor Resartus is semi-known in the literary field," Dr. Blake told Holly. "I think that if you do well, a letter from him would help your career plans."

"What kind of stuff does he write?"

"I don't know. Some kind of writing."

Her advisor's ignorance did not concern Holly. A published writer was a published writer.

Holly finished the article and reluctantly began reading *Lady Chatterly's Lover*. She was asleep in ten minutes, the book gently falling and rising on her stomach.

# Chapter Five: No More Pulps?

Alex rarely received personal letters. His mail was typically bills and ads, and he waited until Saturday to unpack his mailbox. He dropped the mail onto the kitchen table. Electric bill. Numerous department store ads. Car insurance renewal form. Several credit card solicitations.

But underneath a pizzeria ad was a business envelope.

The envelope's upper left-hand corner featured the logo of *Guns, Blood, and Shovels*, and Alex laughed. *Guns, Blood, and Shovels* was a quarterly pulp of mystery, murder, and horror stories. Guns had published three of Alex's short stories over the last four years.

The note inside the envelope was from Tim Skillet, the editor.

Dear Mr. Resartus:

Our accountant—well, okay, we hire an accountant once a year to evaluate our health!—discovered an error in payment made for a story of yours, “Orville’s Lesson in Love.” Seems we underpaid you by twenty dollars. I’ve sent you a check, along with an extra fifteen. We at Guns hope that the extra money will inspire you to contribute more of your work. “Orville’s Lesson in Love” was a hit with our readers. They’d like a follow up! Hope to hear from you.

Yours, Tim

“How kind of you, Mr. Skillet,” Alex murmured, recalling the story. It was about Orville, a rapist. One night, Orville was working in his garage when a woman approached. She lived down the road, she said, and had lost her dog.

Orville raped her.

Afterward, he lay on his back smoking a cigarette. “You think that sex and violence are the same,” the woman accused through bloody lips. Orville agreed. He stabbed her a hundred times then buried her in his back yard.

The next night, someone knocked on his front door. The murdered woman, her ribboned throat glazed with dried blood and moist viscera, stood under his porch light. She pleaded with Orville to let her in. When Orville refused, she threw herself through Orville’s living room picture window.

She chased him through the house. She screamed repeatedly that Orville equated sex with violence. Finally she cornered Orville in his kitchen. She grabbed a carving knife. He covered his face with his arms, weeping. “I’m sorry! Sex and violence are not the same! They’re different!”

The woman laughed. Her upper lip was nearly sheared from her mouth, and it dangled over the side of her jaw. “Just so you won’t forget.” She drove the knife into his stomach.

As Orville died, the woman’s voice deepened into that of a man’s.

Orville awoke in prison. He had been convicted of murdering a woman while she searched for a lost dog. As Orville lay on his cot, sweat-soaked prison garb clinging to his skin, his cellmate slapped him. Orville’s eyes widened. A six foot five con with watery blue eyes and a decorative nail through his earlobe winked. “Turn over. I’m

gonna learn you the difference between rape and love. Just so you won't forget.”

“Orville’s Lesson in Love” was published two years ago. The story was simple, yet Alex enjoyed the crude justice that the pulps demanded. And these days, Alex was grateful to see his name in print on more than bills and junk mail.

Alex wondered if he still had a readership, as the editor claimed. For macabre vignettes, yes. For a novel? Did the readers of *The Best Year His Life* ever wonder why Alex never wrote another book?

Alex walked down the hall to his study. He leaned against the door frame, looked at his desk. On the desk was his computer. Next to the computer, a notebook with several ideas for a novel. The notebook was mostly scribbling and doodles.

The notebook beckoned. He flipped through it, pausing every few pages to review his notes. The notes were mostly character sketches, based on people he knew at the college. As he reviewed the sketches, Alex was angered for the thousandth time. He had written his first novel in three months, filling four yellow legal pads. He wrote standing up, fifteen hours a day, quitting at midnight to sleep on the floor. Alex had been afraid that if he quit writing, he would lose his train of thought: just as when he was a teenager, he read novels in one day, stopping only for lunch and for whatever psychosis medication was in vogue.

Now, staring at his desk, Alex’s anger soared. The anger demanded satisfaction, but the satisfaction had to be gained carefully, without mistakes. He straightened out his notes, filed the letter from *Blood*, then went for a drive.

He took highway 40 south, past Pine Lake. After a half hour on the highway, Alex turned left onto an unnamed gravel road. He cruised at 45, enjoying the soothing hum of tires against black road.

As he tossed his fifth cigarette butt out the window, the headlights revealed the blue windbreaker and red cap of a hitchhiker. Alex slowed, as if to pick up the hitchhiker; as the hitchhiker smiled, Alex stomped the accelerator. The hitchhiker dropped to his haunches and raised his hands, as if praying.

Alex parked the car on the road’s shoulder, and walked the twenty feet that separated the collision from the body. The hitchhiker was on his back, yet his face was flattened into the road. Alex could not see where the bony gruel of the hitchhiker’s face ended and the gravel began.

After studying the body, Alex removed a notebook and pen from his jacket pocket. “This is probably a futile gesture, but the way you landed...Jesus!” In his note book, Alex recorded the geometrical perfection and skeletal perversion with which the body rested.

Alex leaned on his lectern, trying to sound professorial. “Come on. We have to proceed. Come now. Review is important. Who can tell me what rank Mellors held in the army?”

The students shifted in their chairs. A few made no pretense of interest and slept. Holly Dish glanced at her watch, bored, but knew she had to make a good impression. She raised her hand.

Alex nodded.

“Indian,” Holly announced.

“Indian?”

Holly repeated herself, then looked at her classmates. Several were laughing.

Damn, she thought, he asked what rank, not what army.

“He was an officer,” Holly nearly shouted.

“Good,” Alex said. “As long as we’re on it, what nation?”

More shifting in chairs.

Edward Head rolled his eyes. He waited for someone to answer. Finally, almost wearily, he spoke. “Mellors was an Officer in the Indian army. And as long as we’re on it, his father was a miner, just like Lawrence’s.”

Deciding that only Edward had read the novel carefully, Alex continued with his lecture, often turning to his notes. Whenever he lectured, Alex was grateful that his secretary, Mrs. Mathews, was well organized. She kept all his notes on file. They were cross indexed by title, genre, and author.

Alex wanted to discuss the novel’s ground breaking eroticism, but he ran out of time. “Let’s break it off now. Next time, we’ll talk about the real reason the book is famous.”

A few students smiled.

As Jimmy Stubbs watched Holly walk out of the room, he stifled a lust driven groan. She was wearing a skirt today.

Jimmy’s unabashed stare amused Alex. The little guy wants to wrestle her, Alex thought, and she’d pin him in ten seconds. Edward was watching Holly, too. But he was sly. He fumbled with his books and stole glances at Holly’s buttocks, coiled under her skirt.

“Must be animal magnetism,” Alex said as Edward passed the lectern.

Edward stopped. “I’m sorry?”

“Don’t be sorry. I understand. How can I compete with her?”

“What-?”

Alex smiled, nodded at the departing Holly.

Edward looked toward the door, but Holly was gone. “Must be all that talk about Lady Chatterly and Mellors,” he joked.

“We haven’t talked about it yet.”

“Anticipation,” Edward conceded. He stood awkwardly, not knowing how to proceed. He wanted to build rapport with the professor. His attempt to talk about Resartus’s novel had ended quickly. “I very much like Lawrence,” he asserted, trying to sound scholarly.

Edward began rambling about D. H. Lawrence’s home in Taos, New Mexico. Alex walked toward the door, but nodded, indicating that Edward should follow.

From the rear of the class, Jimmy Stubbs cursed. The know it all, he thought, is after Holly too.

Alex bided his time, waiting for the sun to ease into the west. He swiveled around in his chair, rested his feet on a pile of books in the window sill, and gazed out the window of his fourth floor office. The window offered a pleasant view of the court that separated Elmhurst Hall from the library entrance. The court featured concrete benches, scattered abstract sculptures, and a garden of perennials. A cluster of students stood chattering in the court, the breeze ruffling their hair and their jackets. The setting sun reddened the students’ faces. In another thirty minutes, the court would be dark and safe.

Two hours earlier, Alex had bid Edward Head a good afternoon. Edward had even