

There is nothing better or more terrible than being alone.

I can still see vividly the way the light hit her face when she opened the door to peek in on me.

Those two thoughts ran through my mind as I opened my eyes. The first thing I saw was the highway racing past. It was night and we were apparently in rural America because the stars were so bright and street lights nonexistent. The white reflectors raced past us at a blurry speed that indicated how fast we were going. I realized suddenly that we were on Interstate 1. If we drove far enough we would reach the small town of Isolation, Montana.

I felt the tickle of the stream of blood dripping down the back of my head and realized that we weren't going to be driving all the way to Isolation. We were seeking a different sort of isolation tonight. I smiled grimly.

"He's awake," Jessica said coldly.

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/2.

From behind me was an even colder voice. "I know. Keep driving. And for goodness sakes, slow down to the speed limit." It was a male voice.

For the moment I couldn't remember who he was or why he and my wife were taking me to isolation. Well, that last part was a lie, I knew instinctively why they were taking me to isolation. The tickle of blood on the back of my head would not let me forget.

No one is more alone than when they are being led to their death.

My mind didn't want to dwell on THAT so I embraced the key word instead. "When you're alone, you're alone." Bruce Springsteen had said that in the song I must have listened to ten million times during my senior year. I loved that song. The music, which got into your mind like a splinter but could not be removed with a mere pair of tweezers. It had to be desensitized out with repeated listenings until your waitress mother begged you to "find another dang song!" Then there were the lyrics themselves. "Nobody knows honey where love goes. But when it goes, it's gone gone." You didn't get more alone than when you were in a loveless relationship. I glanced at Jessica.

She kept her eyes straight ahead, her mouth closed in a firm white line. She seemed lost in thought as she continued to race into the night at 80 miles per hour.

How long had she felt alone in our marriage?

She still didn't look over. I dropped my eyes to my lap. That long, eh?

A thought returned to me. I can still see vividly the way the light hit her face when she opened the door to peek in on me.

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/3.

My mother, that had been. My mother the bar waitress who let drunks feel her ass in hopes it would increase her tip by 50 cents. My mother, who would spend the night with any man who could get her closer to meeting the rent payment and keep a warm roof over my head for another month. My mother, orphaned at age 13, alone all her life save for me. The son who must be fed and sheltered at any cost.

"He's bleeding. I can smell the blood." The man seated behind me said. There was a metallic click as if he were playing with something. Something cold and dangerous.

"He should be," Jessica replied frostily. "You hit him hard enough to knock him out for half an hour!"

Half an hour. It only takes half an hour to become so physically alone in America. Not another car was in sight in either direction. So much for overpopulation. Of course, this WAS Montana. The world population would have to exceed 10 billion before any of the overspill reached Montana, a state where standing down the block from someone was standing just too damned close.

My father left us when I was an infant. He drowned someone in a pool and spent the rest of his life alone in an 88 man dorm at Montana State Prison. One of his few letters to me, urging me to never give into my temper, had stated with absolute sincerity how alone a man can be even when piled in with a multitude of other people. My father made 15 bucks a month in "state pay" and had that sent to us. My mother used the money one month to buy me a blue scarf that I have to this day. In fact, I realized with a sudden shock that I was wearing it. My blood was presumably soaking the back of it.

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/4.

My mother never remarried, though she would have for my sake if she had been able to find a man who would treat me right.

We passed two cardboard boxes lying on the side of the road. They were rectangular and reminded me of coffins. I visualized them for a second as the two by four and panel type coffins poor people were buried in two hundred years ago when this part of America was still half settled. I visualized them with little red crosses painted on the top with watered down paint. What had my boyhood friend called coffins?

Snooze boxes.

Step right in, it's comfortable. Take a long snooze. No matter how crowded your life, your body spends the last several hundred years of its existence on Earth alone in the dark, in a rectangular snooze box. Unless you were lucky enough to be a member of a culture vanished into the darkness of history and your bones were removed from the earth for display. No longer alone except for nights and the holidays the museum was closed.

My body would never be displayed in a museum. A morgue perhaps, during the murder investigation, but never a museum. Assuming my bones were ever found. The scavengers around here would likely pick the bones clean and scatter them among the sun baked rocks and scrubs.

"You're right about the blood." Jessica complained. She rolled down the window a bit. The wind ripped in with a violent roar. It sounded like a weeping mother.

She used to peek in on me, wondering why I was hiding down in the dark basement.

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/5.

Why I would go downstairs into the clean and dry but very dark basement and sit in a corner for hours without moving. She would peek in and the light from the kitchen would highlight her face. All I would see of her was her round, warm face and one hand clutching the door. I loved the way the light would caress her face. I enjoyed her peeks into the basement almost as much as I enjoyed being alone with my thoughts and my waking dreams.

What mother never understood was that I sat there in the darkness because being alone is good. Listening to your thoughts is good. You can't do that if there is a lot of light and noise present.

I loved being alone. There was nothing better.

"Close the window." The man behind me ordered. There was another of those metallic clicks. It sounded like a robotic clam snapping its shell open and closed. "That noise is giving me a headache."

I was almost amused. You didn't know what a headache was until you had been knocked unconscious by whatever robotic clam he was playing with behind me. The blood dripping from the back of your head defined a true headache.

"Why doesn't he say something?" The man asked plaintively. They seemed to be taking turns playing Good Killer and Bad Killer. Right now he was Good Killer.

Jessica smiled grimly. "Why are you talking about him like he's not right here with us and awake?"

"Hey!" Something metal, perhaps the robotic clam's long nose, prodded my head, just below the wound. "Say something!"

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/6.

My mother had never been much for conversation. She worked or entertained men most of the time. Shopped, cleaned, cooked, washed dishes and clothes ... endless drudgery between peeks into the basement at me. I sometimes think that those peeks in on me were the highlight of her days. She died at the age of 56 having never in her life possessed more than \$100 in her bank account at any one time.

Which is probably why I'm a millionaire. I wouldn't be the first kid to devote his life to avoiding a parent's fate. But I think that the only real way that I was richer than my mother was I can tolerate being alone with no noise to compensate and she could not. It was why, as much as for the favors, she always had a man around. To my mother, being alone was all bad.

"He's in one of his 'waking dreams,'" Jessica said derisively. "You know I caught him once sitting up in the bedroom with the drapes closed and all the lights off. He wasn't even jacking off, he was just sitting there. It's like he goes into a trance."

Unlike my mother, she had not enjoyed finding me like that. The light had not struck and highlighted her much more beautiful face. Which actually made her face less appealing than my mother's plain visage. Jessica had closed the door quickly and never again did she check on me when I was in the bedroom by myself.

This is probably why I haven't done it very often the past year or two. It's hard to feel properly alone without the contrast of encountering someone else unexpectedly.

"I expected him to beg. To try and bribe us." Jessica said. Apparently she was Good Killer again.

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/7.

The man behind me was Bad Killer again. "He knows that once he is dead you get everything. What could he possibly bribe you with?"

"I would beg even if I knew there was no hope. How could you not?" Jessica replied, sounding uneasy.

The man behind me snorted. "I wouldn't beg. If you know you're going to die, what's the point? I'd be all about FUCK YOU and bury me face up so you can suck my dick after I die!" There was another mechanical click.

"Will you stop playing with that gun? It's making me nervous!"

"I'll stop playing with the gun if you slow the hell down. If a cop stops us I'll have to do more than play with it!"

Jessica sniffed. She always did this when she began to get pissy. I didn't think she was aware of it, but it had been my signal for several years now to change the subject or leave the room. "There's not a cop within 20 miles! This is the Thursday before a three day holiday weekend. They're operating with a skeleton crew tonight to get ready for all the overtime this weekend. We talked about this."

As if I needed any confirmation that this had been planned out well in advance.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the seat. The speed was making me feel nauseous. To quiet my stomach I focused on the concept of 'alone.' It was so conditional. Alone was precisely what you wanted to be when it meant being one on one with the stacked cheerleader in high school.

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/8.

But it wasn't always what you wanted to be when it came to speeding time with your wife. Especially if she was sniffing. Nor did you ever want to be alone with a starving tiger. However, alone with a sumptuous feast could be a good thing.

But being alone with these two was going to be deadly for me. And would lead to being alone with the predators until they had completely scattered my body.

The metal nose was pressed against the back of my head again. Higher up this time since my lower head was still pressed against the seat. "If you don't say something in the next five seconds I'm going to blow your head off."

I ignored him. They weren't driving me an hour from our house so they could shoot me in Jessica's car.

The man behind me counted down the seconds as if he were a movie villain. Getting no reaction, he growled and rapped me on the top of my head with the metal nose. I saw stars and my hands crept to my head but I managed to avoid groaning.

"Stop it!" Jessica shrieked. "What is there for him to say? Jesus Christ, what has gotten into you?"

"You were just saying that you wished he would say something." The man sounded sulky. "What does it matter what we do to him? He won't know the difference in a couple minutes."

Saying something that bluntly was a major blunder on his part. Not that there was any doubt what their intentions were, but there was no need to be so provocatively blunt. My silence had become so permanent that they were starting to think of me as not being there. Or, at least, acting as if I wasn't conscious.

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/9.

"We're here." Jessica said. She finally, thankfully, slowed and then turned into a narrow forgotten road.

I knew this road. It led to a deep lake. I had spent many nights there under the gorgeous stars being alone. I brought Jessica a couple times but she didn't do well with alone. Even if it was alone with me unless there was TV or sex involved. Just being alone was not Jessica's style.

We were going to the old strip mine turned lake, a hundred feet deep in places. I imagined they planned to weigh me down and dump me there.

Jessica pulled off the narrow trail, to call it a road was to be overly generous, and stopped the car. The back door opened quickly and the man behind me got out. Jessica activated the lock and the man opened the door for me. He was pointing a .45 automatic pistol at me. Not a robotic clam, then. Too bad.

I fumbled with my seatbelt and got out of the car. My head was swimming and I grabbed the roof of the car to steady myself.

"He's pale as a ghost." The man worried. He was Good Killer now. "Look at him, he can barely stand. I thought the silent treatment was a trick or peevishness, but I think he's mostly out of it."

"You probably fractured his skull." Jessica snapped coldly. Yes, she was Bad Killer again. "That'll just make this easier."

The man pressed his pistol into my gut and leaned close to peer into my eyes. "This isn't like your magic trees, is it writer boy?"

Jessica switched to her new role swiftly. "Those child stories made him, and now me, a millionaire.

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/10.

I wish I could write."

"I never liked those stories as a kid, I sure as hell wouldn't want to write them. Who gives a fuck if someone won't eat green eggs and ham?" He backed away and let Jessica approach me.

She pulled an arm around me to support me. "Come on, it's not a far walk." She looked up at my face as we began that not very long walk. "This is just like our wedding night when we were both too drunk to walk!"

Of all the things she had said to me so far tonight, this was probably the coldest and the cruelest.

It was no surprise that Jessica couldn't write, though lord knows she had tried. You can't write if you can't be alone with your thoughts. I wouldn't be surprised if jealousy over my talent and success more than lust or greed was her primary motivation tonight.

Was that where her love had gone? Riding the coattails of jealousy. How horrible it must be to be jealous of someone you love. The only way to ease that pain was to murder the love. You toss your love into a car and take it out to a deep deep lake in the back of your mind and toss it in. Murdering your love for another person was almost as criminal as murdering the person's body. I thought so, at least. Knowing that she had with forethought and malice strangled her love for me was more painful than knowing how much and how long she had planned the murder of my body.

Her arm was around my waist. I could feel her lithe body moving against me. She was wearing White Linen, a perfume I despised. She knew this, so the choice was probably intentional.

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/11.

She was moving too quickly and my nausea rose again. This time it would not be denied and I pitched forward to my knees and vomited explosively.

"Oh great! How are we going to explain this?" Jessica the Bad Killer snapped coldly as she jumped back, away from me.

"You were moving him too fast!" He complained compassionately.

I had never felt less like laughing in my life, but it was almost comical the way they kept switching roles.

"His car is down by the lake. The only tracks leading to the lake will be from his car. His body will be discovered down there, an obvious suicide. His note is in the car. SO WHY IS HIS PUKE A HUNDRED YARDS UP THE ROAD FROM HIS CAR AND THE LAKE??!!"

"It will be days before his car is noticed. We'll kick some dirt over the vomit and it won't be noticed. The police will be driving over this road anyway, not walking." The man explained calmly.

"Don't take that soothing tone with me, Kelly."

Kelly. He had been saddled with a feminine name. Perhaps that explained his brash attitude. Overcompensated Macho Syndrome.

I was apparently done throwing up. I wiped my mouth on the sleeve of my three thousand dollar suit. I had put this suit on six hours ago, before the Christmas party, despite my wealth it was the most expensive article of clothing I owned and I never would have dreamed before this moment that I would be wiping anything on it. Nor did I imagine it would be my burial shroud.

Jessica grabbed me and pulled me to my feet. "If you cause us any more trouble I'm going to make him do you slowly."

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/12.

Do you understand me?"

How could I have ever thought during courting that she would be the type of person to peek in on me during my alone periods? I have never been so wrong about a person.

Jessica slapped me, causing my head to swim again and the nausea to rise back up. "Answer me you prick! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?!?"

"Yeah, let's mark him up some more." Kelly said sarcastically. "'What is there for him to say?'" He did a good job of mimicking her voice.

"Smart ass." She snapped. "Let's just get this piece of shit in the lake and be done with it. In his condition we won't even have to hope he splashes his brains against the rock wall or barring that keep him from the shore until he drowns. He'll go right under. The head injury will be explained away as occurring during the fall."

She had done something worse than murder her love for me. She had flipped it over as deftly as a blackjack dealer revealing her hole card. Turned it neatly into hatred that was just as passionate.

There were worse things than being alone with a hungry man eating tiger. Such as watching the woman you love eat her love for you and then fall to her knees and vomit out hatred as black as a night predator's eyes.

Even the finest gourmet meal ends up as black shit. But who knew that the most passionate love could end up as this murderous hatred?

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/13.

We were moving again, Jessica helping me stumble along. She was probably right about my skull being fractured. I could barely see out of my right eye and I was suffering the worst headache of my life. It was all I could do to walk even with her support. But none of this was a penlight compared to the blazing supernova of pain that my heart was enduring.

How could I not know how she truly felt until I walked into the kitchen to see her cold grin not 90 minutes ago? One footfall behind me and then a blinding pain in the back of my head later and I was on my knees under the cold Montana sky and puking the last of my illusions away.

Jessica's teeth were chattering. I was getting cold as well, and was glad I hadn't taken my jacket off before going into the kitchen. These two hadn't bothered to bring along a jacket for me. Me being cold was in their best interest.

I visualized hitting the water of the lake. I visualized sinking down, my arms too leaden with cold to move. I would sink down into the arctic depths, not even seeing where the water met the air above me because it was too dark. Alone in the dark, freezing lake, I would sink to the bottom.

It probably wouldn't go down like that. Few things happened as I visualized them, which is why I wrote children's books. I knew one thing. The air temperature was near freezing tonight. One dip into that water and I was a dead man. If I stayed in or got out of the water the result would be the same. That water was Instant Death on a night like this.

Jessica stopped suddenly, about twenty yards from edge of the rise above the lake.

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/14.

Two dozen feet below the rise the lake would be calmly waiting for its tribute. How many people had been executed over the years by being tossed into bodies of water? A million in all of human history? Probably more like a billion.

"He's too heavy. I can't take him any farther. Let's switch." Jessica suggested.

"You've never fired a gun, no way we switch." Kelly replied nervously. "If he overpowers me it will be us two going into that water."

"I can't take him any farther!" She pulled out from under me and I collapsed to my knees again. This time I managed to keep whatever was left in my stomach where it belonged. "Besides, he's barely conscious."

"Maybe it's an act." Kelly said. "Just rest a bit and we'll keep going."

"It's cold as shit out here and I want this over with!" Jessica whined but she stayed beside me, panting.

I had been putting extra weight on her, like a boxer wearing down an opponent. She worked out, but I was a good hundred pounds heavier than she was. And, now that I thought about it, her exercise diligence had begun 8 months ago, had it not? Five times a week, no exceptions. Perhaps she had never gone to the gym at all and had instead been with the Kelly. Perhaps.

"Look, do you realize how big a favor I'm doing for you, sis? I'm risking my freedom, perhaps my life here! I would appreciate a little gratitude. And I am NOT going to carry him. Your husband, your millions of dollars, your burden to carry."

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/15.

Her brother? So much for my suspicions. This had nothing to do with lust and everything to do with money then. Which was ten times more awful. I could understand falling in love with someone else, or even lust. I wasn't the worst sexual partner in human history but I was pretty close according to comments Jessica had made over the years. And I liked to be alone. That was not something many women could tolerate. But to eat her love for me and then discard my physical body for mere money? For something as abstract as numbers on a bank statement or fancy green paper?

I'm not a fool. People kill for money every day. But someone who loved you? This was ten times worse. I fought another wave of nausea.

I glanced up at Kelly. He was standing six feet away, the pistol pointed at the ground. He was looking up at the sky and I thought I saw his face was wet below his eyes. That was probably wishful thinking. What I did realize was that I did now remember him. The head injury and the fact that I had not really seen him well had clouded the issue but I remembered now meeting him at a couple family engagements. He attended our wedding. I had not spent a long time with him but I remembered him now. He once invited me on a hunting trip, oh about three years ago. I had declined. I wrote too much about talking animals to want to kill any real ones. I wonder if he would be here now if I had accepted? I was too much of a recluse to make friends easily, and I was close to none of her family. I barely remembered the names of all five of her brothers.

Did my preference for being alone doom me to an eternity of being alone at the bottom of the lake ahead?

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/16.

My gaze had shifted to Jessica. Her breathing had normalized from big gasps to light panting. The elevator had not been working in the hotel we stayed at during our honeymoon. She had panted just like this after we climbed the five flights of stairs to get to our room. Panting, she had looked at me with eyes shining full of love. This was before she had eaten our love.

Now she turned those same eyes upon me and I saw only black hatred. I wanted to believe it was just the night sky I was seeing but I now knew differently. "Don't look at me!" When I didn't move she slapped my face. I left my face where her hand put it, so I was now looking at Kelly's feet. "I thought this would be easier." Good Killer Jessica said.

"Don't let him Doe Eye you. Just think of his Talky Trashcan book. That's reason enough to kill him."

Jessica laughed, and Kelly joined her. For a moment both of them were Cruel Killers. Then she resumed the Good Killer role. "It has to be this way, can't you see that? The love had obviously left our marriage and you were getting close to Willa. I had to do something before you left me for her and took your money with you."

As foolish as I felt, I suddenly realized that Jessica was more the fool. I adored Willa, she was the most damaged woman I had ever met and my heart wept for her. I met her while reading some of my stories at a children's hospital ward. Willa was the head nurse and she carried with her the pain of thousands of sick, dying, and dead children. My first sight of her, peeking into a room to watch me reading to several sick children, had reminded me of my mother and that foreshadowed how close we would become.

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/17.

She was someone who would peek in on me while I was being alone, I was sure of it.

But I did not love Willa and never would. She was one of my few, if only friends. Jessica was one of those people who did not comprehend cross gender friendships. All she saw was a threat to her lifestyle. But then Jessica was never comfortable being alone with her thoughts. What had Willa once said? 'Only solitary people know the full joys of friendship.'

Jessica got to her feet. "I'm ready." She grabbed my arm. "Get the hell up. Let's see if you can fuck Willa from the bottom of that lake."

Jessica supported me and Kelly followed as before. We cut the distance in half in now time. That made me think about the old mental trick that went "if you continuously walk halfway towards something you will never reach it." Cut twenty yards into ten yards and then five yards and then two and a half yards and then four and half feet and then two and a quarter feet ... and so on. You can always cut a distance into another half. It was mental doggerel of course. Mathematical masturbation on the order of a silly riddle. When is a door not a door?

We where going to reach of the edge of the drop and then I would die alone. No trick questions were going to change that. I thought again of the way the light hit my mother's face as she peeked in on me and I realized something. Thinking Jessica had ever loved me was the mental masturbation. It was delusion of the highest order. No person could eat their love for another so completely.

"Move faster, you son of a bitch!" Jessica grunted.

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/18.

Someone who could say such a thing had never loved me. I had it backwards. She had never loved me and then eaten her love so she could vomit out this vile hatred. She had never loved me at all and her cold, selfish, paranoid greed was coming out now because that was all she was truly capable of.

We passed my car. A new gun metal gray Lexus. They must have driven it out here while I was at the party. Jessica had said she was too sick to attend with me but insisted I make a showing so as not to piss off my publisher and agent. I had rented a limo since I didn't like to drive when wearing this suit. Right after I left they must have driven this out here. Apparently there was a printed out suicide note on the passenger seat. I wondered idly what reasons Jessica had given for my cold plunge. I just wanted to be alone? I found I could picture the printout sitting on the passenger seat in an unmarked envelope but I could not imagine what she had written for me. Perhaps a children's rhyme, since she apparently hated my stories so much.

Six feet from the edge now. One snooze box laid flat away from the edge and icy depths below. I saw from the corner of my eye that Jessica's tongue was sticking out a little in anticipation. She used to do this when initiating sex with me. Before she had coldly informed me how bad I was at intercourse, I had foolishly assumed it was her way of anticipating pleasure. Now I realized for the first time that it was her way of indicating she was mentally preparing herself for something unpleasant. Digging in mentally for a necessary but distasteful task. Much as she wanted me dead she apparently was not going to take any pleasure in actually doing it.

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/19.

That did not comfort me, instead it brought to mind that to her, having sex with me was looked forward to with the same unpleasant relish as killing me. Apparently there was going to be no end to the ways she could hurt me tonight because that realization hurt as much as the others had.

Three feet. I could barely see the water below. The stars were bright but the moon had either not risen yet or was yet to rise. Or maybe it was a new moon right now. I didn't know, but I was thankful that I couldn't see more of that icy, deadly water.

Jessica ducked out from under my arm but retained her grip on my right arm. As I wobbled on my feet I could hear Kelly come closer. Would he push me or would Jessica try to swing me over using my arm?

"Goodbye." Jessica panted, out of breath. I had really leaned on her this time. "I wish things could have been different." She was the Good Killer again. Taking another deep gasp she gripped my arm with both of her hands.

It would be her, then. Her fingers relaxed for a split second as she took another deep breath. I glanced at her. The tongue was still peeking out and the starlight hit the tongue just right for me to be able to see the sweet texture of it. I still loved her. Dearly. I believed that I always would.

My other hand shot forward, seized her wrists, and I swung my body completely around. Jessica, caught completely off guard, came easily. I completed my arc and swung her off towards the edge, releasing her when the momentum was the greatest. Her loose grip of my right arm was ripped away and she stumbled past the edge and dropped with a piecing screech to the water below.

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/20.

The splash of her body getting the icy water was louder than I had imagined mine would be.

I turned to Kelly. He was as frozen as Jessica must now be. Paralyzed with shocked disbelief. He had moved up to within two feet of me and was holding the automatic pointing at the ground. Moving like an automaton, Kelly lifted his arms to push me over. I darted to one side, almost as surprised as he was how fluidly I moved. No, not a skull fracture after all. I had just been suffering from a heart fracture. Kelly was still moving forward to push me, apparently having forgotten all about his gun. He was just looking to his side where I now was when I moved around behind him and gave him the push he had intended for me.

Kelly followed his sister over the edge and into the water below.

I was alone up here now. Alone above the stars.

I made my way down the faint trail to where water and ground met. I used to sit down here on the makeshift beach with Jessica, six feet from the water's edge. Neither of us aware our marriage would end in that very water one cold winter night under a moonless sky. I doubted I would ever come back here again.

They were crying out and splashing. Jessica said something that sounded like "My arms are like lead, I can't swim." But her breath had no strength. The cold water had hit her like a Mac Truck, ripping through her and stealing all strength. For Kelly too. He squealed and fired the pistol twice before a wet choking sound revealed that he had apparently swallowed some of the frigid liquid. I imagined that it had gone down like frozen pudding.

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/21.

But then I was never good at imaging reality. That was why I wrote children's stories.

Jessica screamed out my name in a plaintive cry. It was the first time she had used my name since I entered the kitchen and felt the robotic clam hit the back of my head. I realized something. As far as I could remember in my admittedly currently incoherent state, Jessica only used my name when she wanted something. She never called me by name or even a pet name unless she was asking for money or a new car or a trip or something like that. Which explained why she was using it now.

I reached the beach and walked to the edge of the water. The water got deep very quickly. If I stepped in I would be in over my head before I was even one snooze box away from the shore. Therefore, I was not worried that Kelly was a mere ten feet away from the water's edge. Jessica had not been able to swim at all so she was still near the middle of the manmade lake.

Kelly had lost his gun in his struggle to cough up the water he had swallowed, so he could not shoot me. Instead he reached for me with one shaking hand. "Please." He begged. "Don't let me die ... I'll do anything."

It crossed my mind to ask him if this is how he said 'FUCK YOU' and if he was going to next ask me to make sure he was buried face up. I would never utter that out loud, though. Gloating over his death with his own brash words seemed more morbid than anything they had done to me. Instead I said, "Go to her." My voice was gentle yet insistent. "Don't make her die alone. She hates being alone."

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/22.

I saw his love for her wash over his face and he turned away. Jessica disappeared under the surface of the water when Kelly was within six feet of her. He dove under to try and reach her. My imagination visualized him reaching her underwater and taking her into his arms. They would sink below as I had imagined myself sinking, limbs stiffening and dying before they hit bottom.

Then there was a splash as they surfaced together. They were holding each other as I had imagined they would, but they had not sank to the bottom as I had imagined they would. Not yet, anyway. But they were motionless and obviously dead. Try as I might, moving to either side or raising and lowering my head, I couldn't see Jessica's face. The starlight wouldn't hit it no matter which way I moved or twisted.

I was alone.

I stumbled back up to my car, adrenaline making way for a bone weariness more complete than any I'd ever felt. I opened my door and got in. Kelly had left the keys in the ignition. It wouldn't do for the police to not find my keys, after all. I turned on the car, moved the heater to full blast, and called the police.

My eyes fell on the envelope. It was resting on the dashboard, leaning against the windshield, instead of lying in the passenger seat beside me. I never was good at imaging real life. I knew that it was evidence and that I shouldn't touch it, but my curiosity overcame me. I had to know what excuse she gave for me.

I opened the envelope, pulled out the single sheet of paper, and read the four lines. They were chilling.

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/23.

It was a stroke of brilliance so perfect I could barely believe that Jessica was capable of this. I didn't think that Kelly had written this either. It had to have been Jessica. She hadn't written the standard "goodbye cruel world!" letter for me. She wanted to ensure she got her money by making this an obvious suicide, but she crafted a letter that would convince those few people who knew me well that I had indeed written this letter on my computer and printed it out. Only me or someone who knew me well enough to have heard me speak of my past could have captured my essence like this note did. Another fine stroke, that occurred to me just now. I had believed they chose tonight because it was the day before Christmas weekend, but what I had not thought of was that ten years ago this weekend my mother died. Jessica had kept that in mind while writing this suicide note.

The note read:

I can still see vividly the way the light hit her face, when she opened the door to peek in on me.

She dwells in heaven now, and that is my true place, so that she may peek in on me for eternity.

I set the note aside and cried into my hands. I had never realized that she truly understood why I had felt so close to my mother. I think I only said those first two lines to her twice during our marriage. Neither time had she replied with any understanding. Her inclusion of those lines into my suicide note hinted at a great understanding of me. An understanding that can only come with love. To understand me this much, she must have loved me on some level, at least at first. Mustn't she?

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/24.

I wept, alone, until the police arrived. I wondered if I would ever again let the light hit a woman's face just that right way.

EPILOGUE

"I talk long, I have a date tonight." Willa said a couple months later as she walked me out of the Children's Ward after one of my reading sessions. "I mean, I know you're hurting and if you need me of course I'll cancel..."

I smiled gently. "No, of course not. This is your first date in years."

She seemed defensive about that. "It's hard to think about love when you're surrounded by so much heartache. These poor kids..." She stopped next to the elevator and trailed off.

"I think its great that you're finally dating."

She smiled shyly and pressed the elevator call button for me. To change the subject she asked me how the investigation was going.

"Oh, the case was officially dropped last week. There is no self defense law in this state, but they aren't going to prosecute me. My blood was on the passenger seat of her car and they finally found his gun at the bottom of the lake. He never intended to actually use it so he brought his own registered and publicly purchased gun. Their family is suing me, though. My lawyer is urging me to settle."

"Will you?" She asked as the elevator doors slid open.

I shook my head dismissively, wished her good luck tonight, and hugged her goodbye. I turned to step on board the car.

The elevator was empty, of course.

(CONTINUED)

Alone/Dexter Goad/25.

I rode down alone, my thoughts, imagings, and memories rolling comfortably around together in my head, all the company a person like me could want.

THE END