

From *Anything's Better Than Dying* (a novel)

John Marcher looked around. The driveway on which he was parked was a few hundred metres from the beach road. Too close for comfort. Too many people. He backed out and drove in the direction of town, then took a right towards a backcountry region called Pleasant Valley. It was a network of gravel roads strung along with bungalows, not especially pleasant and not much of a valley. He knew some isolated spots up in the hills where few people went. That was the right place for him now. The washboard road rattled the car and flung up the same white dust as the beach road, leaving a trail long after he'd passed, exactly what he'd wanted to avoid. He took another right on a road that led farther into the hills. A white wooden farmhouse stood near the fork, he'd forgotten it was there, and he could see the yard cluttered with machinery and the barn bursting with new hay, and he could smell manure through the open window. No one was around, no one to see him, no pickup trucks in the yard at least, so he drove past slowly, swearing at himself for turning there in the first place. The road steepened as it cut into the side of a big hill, which was covered by ragged, anemic evergreens and the occasional oak and poplar. The nervy pounding of his heart abated the farther he drove into the wild country. Chunky gravel made the car shudder. Logging trucks and ATVs handled this surface better than his car, and he knew he'd better stop soon because a flat would screw him over completely.

The abandoned house was just farther on. He knew it from having been up here the last three Decembers looking for a Christmas tree, with that combination of happiness that came from being out in the wild again, and apprehension that he'd be caught, along with, as usual, the added worry at the back of his mind about his wife's disappointment and her inevitable irritation with the tree he had brought back; surely of all the millions of trees he could have found one that had nicer branches on the bottom, that didn't look like all the animals had peed on it, etc.

The house was suddenly there. A small wooden one-bedroom with two windows and a sagging roof. There was space behind where he could park and not be noticed. He could even go inside if the doors were open and if the building looked safe. The man who'd built the house was long dead, 30 years or more now, a lightning rod installer, they say, who'd got himself into some sort of trouble, and decided to live out here. Or maybe the deciding happened before.

Marcher had heard the story from someone at the Triangle Tavern a few years ago, the basic outlines of it; there were even rumours about a special gift the guy had. Anticipating a strike before it happened. The story flashed through his mind while he sat in the car. It made sense to him that he thought of the story now because he was, in a weird way, connected with the guy, both of them hunted.

As he sat there he went over the story again, not for the first time, having written over the original telling a few times so that it had become more his own. The temperature of his own blood seemed to fall when the last pictures faded out, after the last violent revengeful crash from above, the old priest struck down. With the end of the story came an end of the tension he had felt on the drive up here – the obsequity to the powers over him, whatever they were, which now took the shape of the guy on the other end of his cell phone who was coming after him. The story had had that calming effect.

He pushed his seatback into a reclining position and stretched out his legs. Trees and bushes surrounded the car, protecting it from the sun. He closed his eyes. The wind through the branches, the sound of birds out there, some place, all soothed him. He kept his eyes closed. Just a little longer, he thought, before he would have to start figuring out what to do....

When he opened his eyes again, the light had changed, a slight lowering of sun-intensity which told him that time had passed. He got out of the car, went to the back door of the house. It was part open; the screen door had swung to one side and was rusted into place, and the mesh long gone. The door was rusted also, so that when he pushed at it to go inside it creaked and groaned. Inside, his eyes adjusting to the dark, he made out a dirt-coated wooden floor, missing boards in places, a few stones, probably that someone had thrown through a window, two upside down blue milk crates, and crumpled Keith's cans rusted almost beyond recognition. In the other room, an iron carcass of a single bed was against the wall.

There was a scraping sound coming from somewhere, something against the side of the house or the roof, then he realized it was the branches of the trees and bushes. He took a last look around. In the main room, near the back door he noticed an iron coil on the floor, and when he nudged it with his foot, when some of the dirt was brushed aside, he saw a seam about a metre-long perpendicular to the floor boards. He reached down, pulled at the coil, and lifted a section of the floor. A trap door. It came up easily on its hinges. There was just enough light through the back door for him to see three steps going down into a rudimentary cellar or crawl space, roughly hacked out of the ground. It was pitch black down there. He poked his head inside, thought he saw the cellar extend a few metres around; it was hard to be sure. He never kept a flashlight in his own car, and he didn't think there was one in the Subaru, he didn't bother to check, so he put his shoulder into the back door of the house and pushed it open wider, the noon light slanting into the house rectangularly, and diving into the cellar a little distance and then grainily petering out. But he could see more.

The room was small, low-ceilinged, maybe five feet high, the floors and walls all dirt, and empty, almost empty. Something was stacked against a wall, he was pretty sure it was equipment from a still, or that was his first thought, what else would make sense, he asked himself. For sure by now scavengers had emptied this place of anything valuable. It had been decades since anyone had lived here. He stood quietly, thinking for a moment. The branches scraped against the house. Something else crept along the roof, probably a bird. A wind blew strongly through the door. Whatever the objects were in the cellar they were only a few metres from the steps, He was afraid of heights, and dark enclosed spaces also, but he thought he could manage it, his curiosity overcame his good sense, and then he was descending the stairs and stepping tentatively across the rough floor, bent over, until he reached the objects. Five or six were stacked together, longish and rough in his hands.

He held one and was about to go back when the cellar door slammed shut. Something had blown it down. The wind, probably it was the wind, he thought. Or maybe he hadn't lifted the door all the way up. He held onto one of the objects and carefully with arms extended found the stairs again. His heart was beating heavily; his only thought was to get up and out as fast as he could. He found the stairs, stepped onto the first one and pushed on the door, his arms above his head. The door didn't budge. He thought at first it was because he'd pushed on the wrong side, so he climbed farther up the stairs, to the top, and heaved against the door with his back, using his legs to shove upwards, but the door didn't move, the thing wouldn't open. "Jesus Christ, open up," he screamed, "open *up!*" He tried again, then again, ramming his back and head against the door. It seemed to lift a smidgeon, but wouldn't open. "Holy shit, holy shit," he screamed. "You idiot, you stupid idiot, now you're fucked, really really fucked!" In the pitch-black cellar, his screams were snuffed out almost immediately. No one was going to hear him, no one could hear him, and his car was hidden behind the bushes of the house, and it wasn't even his car. He was erasing himself more and more with each of his decisions, totally disappearing, deleting himself; it wasn't much different than swimming out in the ocean or jumping off a ferry in the black night with no one to see, to know. He

punched at the door. The seal was tight, the door tamped down, so no light shone through. This was real darkness.

He ran his fingers along the edge of the trapdoor at the hinges to clean out some of the debris, whatever he could, to clean out the seam and maybe open the door. He rammed his back against it again and again. Nothing. It was stuck, stuck for good. His desperate fingers clawed at the wood. He kept ramming his back against the door. He did it over and over until he started to hyperventilate. He sat back on the stairs trying to get his breath. How much air was down here anyway, he wondered. The door was sealed tight so there wasn't any air coming through it, and the rest of the room looked pretty closed off, even the beams above were sealed; otherwise he would have seen some light. So there wasn't that much air, and the more he tried to open the door, the harder he went at it, the worse it actually was for him. It was best if he did nothing, sat here doing nothing, to stretch out the amount of available air as much as he could. If he wanted to live longer he had to do nothing.

Tears of remorse and self-pity popped into his eyes. Thoughts about the world out there ran through him. The one he'd just left. He imagined the fields outside this house, the fresh air, the birds singing, a sweet sound of summer, now a threnody for himself; he saw the beaches and the sea around the county and the rest of the world where he'd been, felt the cool salty waves on his summer hot skin, he saw himself as the boy long ago running through ravines and sling-shooting pellets at houses and passing cars, just being free and not thinking about it, taking it all for granted because he didn't expect to end up in a cellar in an abandoned house somewhere in the middle of nowhere, how could he have imagined or predicted it, no one can. Other pictures came to him all jumbled together with different feelings. He saw himself with all the girls he would come to know. He saw himself and his young wife before they were married, a dark beauty with black shock of hair and haughty expression, how they went up into the hills to an oak forest, the sun shafts golden and beautiful pouring down. Surely now after a few hours she had begun to wonder where he was, despite everything, and maybe had begun a search for him, called the police in, he could hope, and now he hoped they were on his trail just as before he'd wanted to disappear, fly under the radar and fly out of her life forever, but now he was ready to countermand it all and call out to her, scream her name, which he did, uselessly he knew, even as he knew it was a waste of breath, was in fact wasting the air in this place, this grave, and actually speeding up his death.

That was when he heard the scraping sound from before, which he'd thought was on the roof. Now it was over his head, on the floor of the room above, on the trap door, not a scraping actually, but the unmistakable shifting of feet. He froze. Someone was there. Someone had been standing on the trap door; the weight of the body must have prevented him from opening it. Then the door suddenly lifted. A shower of dust and light fell on his upturned face. He couldn't see anyone. But he saw the way up. He scrambled up the stairs and climbed into the room. Through squinting eyes he noticed that the light had changed. The sun no longer came through the back door, and the room was darker than before.

There was a man in the room. He stood in the middle of it, having backed off from the trapdoor. The man was thin, with a lined severe face and black eyes. He wore a denim shirt and jeans, faded but perfectly clean, and black scuffed work boots that looked too big for his feet. His hands hung stiffly at his side off his thin arms, hung there awkwardly as though he didn't know what to do with them when they weren't working, moving.

The men looked at each other.

Finally, Marcher said, "thanks for letting me out. I couldn't do it on my own."

The man didn't answer. His face had the expression of someone looking at a wall with nothing on it.

"I guess you must have seen me come up the road. I didn't hear your car, but obviously I was down there."

The man didn't answer. He stood with his arms at his side, hands motionless except for an almost unnoticeable chafing of left index finger and thumb. When the man finally talked, his words didn't fill the quiet room as a normal living voice would; instead, the voice whispered inside John Marcher's own head, its texture a little roughened like an old recording, or a tinny scratchy minister's sermon on an A.M. channel on a Sunday morning as he drove across the empty prairies....

"You have no right to be here," the voice said.

"Sorry, I didn't think I would do any harm," he answered.

"You have no right to be here," the voice repeated. "All of you coming here with your drink and your talk, your town chatter, I have seen you all year after year, always the same."

"I have never been here before," he assured the man.

The cold, raw acetic voice went on. "I lived the clean and narrow, never abased myself to their level, never stooped. They are all still there, one generation after the next, always new and always the same. I hated them for a time. But when I came here, again, afterwards, I saw them anew. I even pitied them. They had a wisdom I did not understand at first. And so, I learned. And I showed how I learned when I gave you life again. I taught you, and then I gave you life."

The voice went up an octave, hissing: "I coulda left you in that hole, fucker, and listened to you die, I had the power. But I taught you instead. And then I gave you life." He stood looking at Marcher for a second, then said, "Now you will go back there and live your future days with this new message in the heart of you and you will do what you can, even if it is meaningless and empty as you people are. Anything's better than dying."

He didn't answer the man. They stood facing each other, and then the scene went albescent and grey, died out, and he went outside again into the day, found himself in the car, leaned back on the reclining seat, just as he'd left it, feeling his skin start to warm up....

He jerked up out of his seat and looked around. He wasn't shaking anymore. The light had changed again, that much he noticed before he checked the cell phone, 3:14, and the side of the house, earlier covered by shade, was lit by the hot bright sun, but the car itself in the bosquet was still in the blue-green shade. There was no sign of anyone around. The door of the house was ajar as it had been before. A bit of a breeze lightly shivered the leaves and a churr of insects out there some place reached his ears through the open windows.

Sharply awake now, he started to go through the avenues of possible actions in front of him, thinking through to the end, the ends, the message of the haunting voice at the back of it all guiding him, or if not guiding him then setting up a sequence of directions enfilade-like through which he could walk and get out on the other side untouched, unharmed, more or less intact as the person he had been or had wanted to be, but had lost over the years. The words came back to him, the crackling A.M. voice fighting through bad interference, sermonizing again, telling him something, something outside or beyond the words themselves, or underneath them, waiting for the full strike of their power to hit home. He sat a few minutes longer. The object beside him propped on the passenger seat was one of the objects he'd found in the crawl space below the house, and which, somehow, he had kept hold of as he stepped back into the house. It was about a metre long, narrow, with a thinnish point. The copper had oxidized over time so, of a greenish hue, it lay there undeniable and unequivocal, a lightning rod.