



Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel

By Stephen Dobyns

Download now

Read Online →

Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel By Stephen Dobyns

Stephen Dobyns—whom Stephen King has described as "the best of the best"—is back with a comic suspense novel about a small-time con operation, a pair of combative detectives, and the pride, revenge, and deception that guide us all. Richard Russo meets Elmore Leonard.

In the seaport town of New London, Connecticut, newcomer Connor Raposo has just witnessed a gruesome motorcycle accident on Bank Street. At least he thinks it was an accident. A man sliced in half by a reversing dump truck could *only* be an accident, right?

But these days, Connor can't be sure of anything—his entire line of work is based on games of artful deception. His days at Bounty, Inc., are spent soliciting funds for improbable, bogus charities; its last venture was Free Beagles from Nicotine Addiction, Inc. The new scam is Prom Queens Anonymous, Inc., dedicated to helping former high school celebs transition to humdrum daily grown-up lives; Connor's target is Angelina Rossi—Pumpkin Queen of 1985, proud beagle owner, and ex-wife of a man named Fat Bob.

Meanwhile, Manny Streeter and Benny Vikström are the local detectives assigned to the Bank Street motorcycle wreck, and despite their shared interest of proving each other wrong, the two eventually reach the same conclusion: This death by Harley was Murder One, pure and simple. As the detectives begin asking their questions around town, Connor is looking for similar answers that will determine whether he lives or dies. Among them: Who is Fat Bob, and is he actually dead?

Sharply written and entertainingly absurd, *Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?* is packed with Stephen Dobyns's trademark characters—whimsical, neurotic, puzzling yet familiar, and impossible to pin down. Dobyns again proves why he is an American master of the suspenseful, all-too-human land of the absurd.

From the Hardcover edition.

 [Download Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel ...pdf](#)

Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel

By Stephen Dobyns

Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel By Stephen Dobyns

Stephen Dobyns—whom Stephen King has described as "the best of the best"—is back with a comic suspense novel about a small-time con operation, a pair of combative detectives, and the pride, revenge, and deception that guide us all. Richard Russo meets Elmore Leonard.

In the seaport town of New London, Connecticut, newcomer Connor Raposo has just witnessed a gruesome motorcycle accident on Bank Street. At least he thinks it was an accident. A man sliced in half by a reversing dump truck could *only* be an accident, right?

But these days, Connor can't be sure of anything—his entire line of work is based on games of artful deception. His days at Bounty, Inc., are spent soliciting funds for improbable, bogus charities; its last venture was Free Beagles from Nicotine Addiction, Inc. The new scam is Prom Queens Anonymous, Inc., dedicated to helping former high school celebs transition to humdrum daily grown-up lives; Connor's target is Angelina Rossi—Pumpkin Queen of 1985, proud beagle owner, and ex-wife of a man named Fat Bob.

Meanwhile, Manny Streeter and Benny Vikström are the local detectives assigned to the Bank Street motorcycle wreck, and despite their shared interest of proving each other wrong, the two eventually reach the same conclusion: This death by Harley was Murder One, pure and simple. As the detectives begin asking their questions around town, Connor is looking for similar answers that will determine whether he lives or dies. Among them: Who is Fat Bob, and is he actually dead?

Sharply written and entertainingly absurd, *Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?* is packed with Stephen Dobyns's trademark characters—whimsical, neurotic, puzzling yet familiar, and impossible to pin down. Dobyns again proves why he is an American master of the suspenseful, all-too-human land of the absurd.

From the Hardcover edition.

Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel By Stephen Dobyns Bibliography

- Rank: #510464 in eBooks
- Published on: 2015-09-01
- Released on: 2015-09-01
- Format: Kindle eBook
- Number of items: 1

 [Download Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel ...pdf](#)

Editorial Review

Review

"Stephen Dobyns pulls off a neat misdirection in this brazenly titled comic crime novel. On its face, "Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?" is a frivolous romp through an underworld of solecism-spouting thieves and doltish enforcers. But...there's surprising depth here, as Dobyns convenes an ensemble cast whose thwarted ambitions suffuse an antic storyline with an air of poignancy." —**The Washington Post**

"This crafty, witty, hilarious novel by award-winning writer Stephen Dobyns...views life as whimsical and capricious, or as one character describes it, "tradiculous," a mixture of tragedy and the ridiculous." —**Providence Journal**

"A uproariously entertaining comic thriller that evokes Elmore Leonard and Donald E. Westlake but adds several layers of absurdity and a narrative voice that suggests metafiction meets a Greek chorus meets Jane Austen... Yes, it's absurd; yes, it's outrageous; but here's the thing: somehow, amid all the craziness, there's a beating heart, too." —**Booklist (starred review)**

"The latest offering from veteran novelist and poet Dobyns (*The Burn Palace*) delights with quirky characters, absurd situations, language play, and keen insights. Recommended for those who enjoy dark humor and complicated plots in their mysteries." —**Library Journal**

"Gold Dagger Award-finalist Dobyns' genius for dark comedy makes this intricate crime novel a triumph that will appeal to Elmore Leonard and Carl Hiassen fans." —**Publisher's Weekly (starred review)**

"Stephen Dobyns is what the baseball scouts call a five-tool player: he writes with ease and insight, he can make you laugh in one paragraph and rock you back on your heels in the next, and he tells stories that you can't put down. All those talents are in full flower in *IS FAT BOB DEAD YET?* I loved it, and so will you." —**Stephen King**

"Another darkly comic whodunit from veteran novelist Dobyns...a lively, laugh-out-loud winner." —**Kirkus**

About the Author

Stephen Dobyns is the author of more than thirty-five novels and poetry collections, including *The Burn Palace*, *The Church of Dead Girls*, *Cold Dog Soup*, and *Cemetery Nights*. Among his many honors are a Melville Cane Award, Pushcart Prizes, a 1983 National Poetry Series selection for *Black Dog, Red Dog: Poems*, and three National Endowment for the Arts fellowships. His novels have been translated into twenty languages, and his poetry has appeared in the *Best American Poetry* anthology. Dobyns, who has taught at the University of Iowa, Boston University, Syracuse University, and Sarah Lawrence College, teaches creative writing in the master of fine arts program at Warren Wilson College.

Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

It's an early spring morning in late winter, a welcome oxymoron with balmy breezes that send Connecticut College students back to their dorm rooms for shorts and flip-flops. Bare legs proliferate. Businessmen loosen their ties. One mad rogue, the owner of a coffee shop, moves two small tables with chairs out to the sidewalk. Motorcycles emerge from winter hibernations. It would be wrong to say it's a good day on which to die, but surely one can imagine worse days.

This is Bank Street in New London, Connecticut, the name referring not to commercial activity but to the curving riverbank of the river Thames, which the street follows. We can see the river if we look across the cellar hole next to the Salvation Army thrift store, where a dozen rusty pilings rise from the ground. The lot contains a depressing collection of broken glass, plastic bags, plastic bottles, and decrepit cardboard boxes, but we can ignore that. Down the slope and dividing the back entries of Bank Street enterprises from the train tracks is Water Street: more of a wide alley with pretensions than a street. Then comes the river with a few pleasure piers and the coast guard's three-masted, 290-foot cutter, the *Eagle*, which is a wonder to see under full sail. Across the river in Groton, those great gray square buildings flanked by yellow cranes are part of the General Dynamics shipyard where submarines are made, though few get made nowadays.

Bank Street is a hodgepodge of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century buildings, ranging from the beautiful to the ugly, granite Gothic Revival to redbrick Victorian to the brick-and-tin Salvation Army thrift store, a small-box version of a big-box store next to the granite Custom House. In an early version of urban renewal, Benedict Arnold and his Hessians put prior Bank Street buildings to the torch in 1781.

Back by Firehouse Square is where the historic district begins as modern streetlights change to retro streetlamps and Bank Street changes to one-way, heading downtown. The Greek Revival-style F. L. Allen Firehouse is now an art gallery, while a sign on the three-story granite house of Captain Benjamin Brown across the street advertises a Chinese-medicine practitioner. A bucket truck squats by the traffic island, and high in the air a service technician fixes the streetlight. Two traffic lights hang below an arm extending from the same pole; they sway slightly as the fellow in the bucket does his work.

If we could take his place for a minute, we'd have the chance to inspect the nature of this Monday morning in early March: cloudless sky, men and women carrying their coats over their arms, kids already in shorts, one fellow parked in front of the Firehouse Art Gallery has put down the convertible top of his blue Mazda Miata, people pause to address friendly remarks to one another as they go about their business, sunlight reflects off the river where we see seagulls, and from an open window we hear one of those older rock tunes heard mostly in supermarkets: the Eagles or Fleetwood Mac. It's a day that feels like unexpected forgiveness.

Beneath us a blue Mini-Cooper waits at the light. The driver's elbow, hidden in a brown leather sleeve, pokes from the open window. He makes his left turn from Tilley and drives slowly down Bank Street, looking for a parking space. There, he's found one. Gingerly, he pulls up behind a four-door Chevrolet Caprice sedan, which has to be twenty years old. The original dark cherry paint has faded, giving the big car a mottled aspect. The trunk is held shut with a length of rope, and a busted-up teardrop spotlight hangs down the side of the driver's door. The man climbs from his Mini and glances at the Caprice with mild interest, but before he can cross the street, he's startled by a blast from a train's air horn. About forty passenger trains come through New London each day, and two-thirds stop—Amtrak's Northeast Regional and the Acela Express, as well as a commuter line between New London and New Haven. And each blasts its horn. As if in response, the Mini goes *beep-beep* as the locks click shut, and the man continues across the street to a shoe-repair shop. The Greek shop owner has been there for more than thirty years and prefers to be called a cobbler.

The man is on his way to pick up a pair of shoes, new soles, heels, and a good polishing for his black Bruno

Magli slip-ons, a rush job because he only took them in on Saturday. The shoes were a gift from his older brother, Vasco; actually they're hand-me-downs that Vasco found too tight. Vasco has rich tastes, and over the years his brother has benefited. Another item taken from Vasco is a purposeful stride, leaning forward and walking quickly, which, when a teenager, our friend liked enough to copy and which makes any destination seem the only one possible.

The man's name is Connor Raposo, though his Portuguese parents baptized him Juan Carlos and into his late teens everyone called him Zeco. But just before college, he decided he needed a new identity and changed his name to Connor. He's in his mid-twenties—thin, six feet tall, straight nose, chestnut eyes, moderately handsome, black hair that grazes the collar of his jacket, though if we were really looking down from a cherry picker, we might see an incipient bald spot, which in twenty years, if he lives that long, will overspread his dome. Besides his purposeful walk, he has a purposeful face. Connor will appear somber even when telling a joke. But his expression derives from the shyness he felt as a kid; it discouraged people from talking to him. You know that bromide “He's laughing on the outside but crying on the inside”? Connor's just the opposite.

Unlike the pasty winter faces of others on Bank Street, Connor's face is tanned, which is no surprise, since he left San Diego a week ago, and yesterday, dropping off his shoes, was his first visit to New London. What else? He wears jeans, running shoes, and a brown leather jacket he's had since college.

But to move along: Connor has given the elderly cobbler his claim ticket, and the cobbler has held up the black Bruno Maglis for Connor's inspection. He sets them on the counter, where they glisten like anthracite. The leather soles are a change for Connor. Usually he wears soft, rubber-soled shoes and he walks as softly as a wink, whether to sneak toward something or sneak away, he can't be sure. The cobbler counts out a fistful of one-dollar bills—Connor's change—while apologizing for having nothing bigger.

“You want a bag?” The cobbler has gray tufts of hair sprouting from his ears, woolly entanglements to snatch the oncoming words one by one.

“Never mind, my car's right across the street.” He stuffs the bills into his jacket pocket.

A sound grows audible, a distant purr, which leads the cobbler to shake his head. “The first of the season, just like robins.” Then, seeing Connor's blank expression, he adds, “Harleys—spring, summer, and fall they come roaring past.”

The distant purr changes to a low rumble that increases in volume and reverberates off the stone buildings. It's an intrusion that loosens the mind from previous thoughts. Indignant seagulls flap away toward the water.

“We have noise restrictions in California.” Connor had a noisy Harley in college and loved it. “Can't you make a complaint?”

Before the cobbler can answer, the Harley flashes by, twin headlights, a blur of candy orange, Stinger wheels, Tommy Gun pipes, lots of chrome, a growl like a brontosaurus. It's a snapshot shooting past the window. The plate glass shivers.

Then everything gets faster yet: the roar of a second motor rises above the roar of the Harley, a woman screams, a squeal of rubber to make Connor brace himself. Next comes a packed combination of noises: a collision of metal against metal, a wrenching shriek, glass breaking, the crunch and clatter of hundreds of little bits scattered across the pavement; a window shatters, and hidden within the variations of smash is the sound of a speeding biker striking an immovable object.

Connor hurries to the sidewalk. A large green dump truck has backed out of an alley and across Bank Street, ramming a parked BMW 300-something, shoving it over the curb into the now demolished display window of a music store. The guy on the Harley has hit the side of the dump truck.

But it's worse than that. The truck's dump box rides high on the axles, and the lower part of the Harley—wheels, V-twin engine, transmission, chrome pipes—has passed beneath, while the top part of the Harley—twin headlights, handlebars, gas tank, and half of the biker—has not. They've been separated. The rider has been ripped in two, so his bloody torso lies in the street, while under the truck at the end of a red smear are the legs, one with a boot, one not. The head has been detached from the neck and has vanished. Connor turns away so as not to lose his breakfast.

Blood and body fragments paint the nearby cars and windows of shops. The street is a mess of color. The truck has continued to roar; then the driver cuts the engine and climbs from his cab, his face creased with astonishment. A young man in a formerly white shirt stands across the street from Connor with blood streaming from his shoulder. It's a little after ten o'clock. Connor smells gasoline mixed with the smell of the river at low tide. For a nanosecond the scene is without movement or sound, except for someone retching.

Then, as if a lever were yanked, all becomes noise and action. People cry out. A young woman in shorts covers her face with her hands. If Connor were closer, he'd see spots of blood on her white legs. Some people hurry away; others run toward the wreckage with eye-popping avidity. There's a rush of randomness and instability that people try to reduce to order. Another young woman spits into a handkerchief and dabs at red spots on her blouse. A man in a blue business suit sits on the sidewalk with his legs outstretched, cleaning his glasses with his necktie. Cars honk as drivers are forced to stop farther back at Firehouse Square and have as yet to realize the reason for the delay. Soon comes the sound of sirens. Seagulls circle.

Connor stands twenty feet from the accident. He stares not at the truck or the biker's multiple bloody fragments but at a black leather Harley cap by the edge of the curb. He stoops to pick it up, half expecting to find the top part of a skull. But there's nothing, a few sweat marks, a few black hairs, and grease from whatever stuff the dead man put on his scalp. Oh, yes, the Harley cap has a red satin lining and on the lining is written a name in black ink: MARCO SANTUZZA.

A pair of broken aviator sunglasses lie in the gutter. Closer to the truck lies the torn black sleeve of a leather jacket in the midst of broken glass and pieces of metal. A hand extends from the cuff; silver rings embellish the fingers and thumb, one with a blue stone, another showing a skull. Connor again turns his head to avoid being sick and looks into the faces of twenty men and women gaping past him, their features magnified by disbelief.

Connor's sensory receptors are on serious overload as the street grabs his attention, but the strain creates a fog, and he has to half close his eyes in order to see. Now he shakes his head to free it of bloody images. He wants to get into his car and leave, but the street is jammed with cars and there'll be no freeing his Mini-Cooper until these are cleared. Just beyond the square is fire headquarters, a two-story brick building with two large bays. Out of one pokes the red nose of a hook and ladder truck. This is where the fire marshal has his office, but because of the traffic jam, the firemen won't go anyplace unless they walk.

People try to direct traffic, waving their hands to urge drivers to back up to Tilley Street, but some drivers have left their cars and have run forward to see the drama. People raise smartphones to take pictures. A police car half on the sidewalk makes earsplitting horn blasts as it pushes past the cars. For Connor the noise comes from inside his head: it's his brain's response to the awfulness. He tucks the Harley cap under his arm, meaning to keep it as visual proof of what he'd rather forget, and leans against the cobbler's window. The door is open, and the cobbler is down by the smashed Harley, staring at something unpleasant near his feet.

Connor retrieves his Bruno Maglis from the cobbler's counter and makes his way between the jammed cars to lock the shoes in his Mini-Cooper.

This would be the moment to use our cherry picker again, but how much can be said? Once we've reached a point beyond belief, words are unreliable. "I can't believe this is happening!" At least a dozen people say this. Clichés soothe at such times; they link the horrific to the banal and make it tolerable. A few seagulls peck at bits of bloody tissue. Connor still hasn't seen the biker's head, which is just as well. It's been smashed to fragments, or on a rooftop, or is bobbing down the river.

Now we come to a difficult introduction. Standing across the street by the crushed BMW is an elderly, homeless man who has a tail. No, no, he doesn't really have a tail, but he is certain he woke this morning with a tail, a long, gray, scabrous tail without fur. Perhaps the fur has fallen out; perhaps it never had fur in the first place. This is something he can't recall. Right now the tail is no more than a sinuous dark shadow, but the man's hands have begun to shake, and the more they shake, the sooner his tail will reappear, unless he gets a drink first.

The previous evening, in the bushes beneath the Interstate 95 bridge, he had blended a fifth of Everclear with five packets of grape jam snatched from a Greek diner. This reduced the alcohol proof from 190 to about 187, which he still saw as potent. He chose grape because he meant to make something winelike. Perhaps he had succeeded—he can't remember, because he blacked out almost immediately. This, to his mind, is a good thing. Erasure is what he's after, the more the better.

The man's name is Fidget, but it isn't his real name. It's just what he's called. As for last names, he's had a bunch of them. Nor is he sure of his age, though he knows he's over sixty, but that's been true for a while, so maybe he's seventy by now. He wears a Red Sox cap, a torn raincoat that once was beige, pants of an uncertain dark color, and muddy sneakers. In place of laces, he uses twine. His gray hair is currently short, and if his cap were removed, we'd see that it has a ragged look. A girl under the bridge cut it in exchange for three cigarettes. And Fidget is thin enough that his body seems to vanish beneath his raincoat, as if the coat were draped over a parking meter. His long face is gray, unshaven, and somewhat disarranged from years of violent readjustments. The middle of his nose, for instance, makes a distinct curve to the left, something like a question mark. His eyes resemble those of a pug dog: dark brown and protruding. It's not an ugly face, though it's seen a lot of use.

But the tail is a concern. There's no hiding a tail five feet long that won't stay wrapped around his waist. It likes to flip about like the tail of a disgruntled cat. Fidget wishes he could meet these downturnings of fortune philosophically, but as his age increases so his patience decreases. A few years ago, he had paws instead of hands, and once he had the hooves of a palomino horse, which were noisy. So a rat's tail is a step up, as long as people don't see it. Fidget believes if he just had an alcohol drip, as he once had a morphine drip, he wouldn't be plagued by illusionary appendages.

He'd been on the sidewalk by the music store when the accident took place, and although he is shocked by the man's death—the tearing asunder and general horror—he also looks for opportunity, as he always looks for opportunity. This morning he thinks he has found it. He feels sure he has seen something he can turn into money, maybe a lot of money, if he's patient.

Right now he focuses on how he'll spend his money, and these imaginings are a lively pleasure. He'll say good-bye to sleeping under the bridge. He'll rent a single-room apartment with an electric fire and an armchair where he can sit in the evenings and chew on a good cigar. It's a happy-making image; it also strikes him as suitably modest, so modest that he feels sure of its fulfillment. But as for patience, Fidget

knows no patience, unless it's the open-ended patience called forgetting.

Fidget has moved into the street closer to the scene of the accident to a spot that he believes is free of the dead guy's fleshy remnants. He wears no socks, and his sneakers have holes. No way does he want bits of the dead guy glued to the bottoms of his feet. A city detective talks to the driver of the truck as they stand by the open door of the cab. Fidget wants to know what they're talking about. The keys are in the ignition, and a steady *ding-ding-ding* comes from the cab. A TV truck has driven up Bank Street to the other side of the dump truck, and a cameraman films the dead guy's feet, one with a boot, one not. No way is that shot going to make the evening news.

Fidget takes a step closer, then turns his back to suggest a lack of interest. Coming toward him along the sidewalk are ten firemen pulling a very long hose. They grunt and stumble and press on, as if pulling a full-size elephant by its trunk. Shielded by firemen, Fidget takes another step toward the detective. He's had dealings with this man, whose name he can't recall, and he knows the more pissed the man becomes, the more quietly he speaks. At the moment the detective is not raising his voice above a whisper. As for the driver, he's saying something about the brakes or how his foot slipped. He holds his hands in front of him with his palms facing out; a drop of sweat hangs from the tip of his nose. He's a middle-aged guy with a big belly, and his face is as round as a poker chip.

Three uniformed cops make their way toward the truck, shooing gawkers from the scene. Fidget knows these cops from a multiplicity of threats and head slaps he's received in the past. None can he call friends, but he'd like to hear something useful before he's yelled at. He steps over the fire hose to the wall of a vacant furniture store across from the music store, and he stands quietly except for giving an occasional thump to his tail. It's again begun its serpentine gestures.

Fidget had seen the truck back out of the alley and shouted, "Hey!" or "Watch out!"—he can't recall which—but nothing could be heard over the noise of the truck and the approaching motorcycle. Then, in a second, it was too late. He barely had time to duck into the music store's alcove and crouch down with his hands over his head. The destruction of the Harley, the truck hitting the BMW at the curb and pushing it onto the sidewalk, the smashing of the music store's display window have created serious wreckage, and if it hadn't been for the BMW, the truck would have broken through the window to crush the shiny trumpets and trombones.

Now the nearest cop shouts at him, "Get the fuck outta here, prickhead. You some kind of pervert?"

Fidget moves back up Bank Street. No way does he want to get hit with a nightstick. His tail flaps back and forth. He smacks it to keep it quiet, but this only excites it. Over the years he's had many humiliations. The tail is just the most recent. But Fidget can't let it distract him from future profit.

—

Detective Benny Vikström stares at the truck driver's belly, which hangs over his leather belt like a slab of snow curving over the edge of a winter roof, although this particular slab is covered by a blue work shirt. Vikström tries to guess how many gallons of beer over how many years produced a gut like that.

"I still don't see why you couldn't hit the brake."

The driver, Leon Pappalardo, shifts from one leg to the other. "I tried, I slammed down my foot but only hit the gas. I already told you I never drove this truck before. The pedals are different, I mean the space between them, like, it's narrower. Then the gas stuck, and before I could fix it, I hit the Beemer."

“And the guy on the bike?”

“Like I said, he ran into me. I feel bad about it.”

Vikström lifts his eyes from the man’s belly to his face and decides he doesn’t look as if he feels bad. He looks scared. Vikström has seen this look often: pretend calm and confidence with fear leaking from the guy’s face like water from cupped hands. And Pappalardo’s dyed black hair suggests a vanity that, to Vikström’s mind, sits uneasily with the belly. It might even suggest a kind of ambition.

Benny Vikström’s name is Swedish, which should surprise nobody. He likes his name, though he’s tired of people asking, “Whadja say it was again?” And when he spells it for someone, he adds, “With an umlaut,” which leads to more questions. He was born and brought up in New London, but his parents came from Malmö fifty years ago. Soon after that his father, Acke Vikström, took a job at Electric Boat.

Vikström is forty-five, thin, a few inches over six feet, with one of those long, angular faces that appear cut from granite. His high cheekbones have an alpine look; his eyes are bright blue. His thinning blond hair is turning gray and is cut short with a fringe in front. He’s been a New London cop for fifteen years and a detective for five. By his figuring he should be a detective sergeant by now, but women fucked up the competition. He doesn’t complain, for the most part. It’s this equal-opportunity stuff. Even the police chief’s a woman, for crying out loud.

“I still don’t see why you couldn’t hit the brake.”

Leon Pappalardo’s head shakes like a bobblehead doll’s, and he squints up at Vikström. “Aren’t you fuckin’ listening? I already—”

Vikström reaches out and taps on the beer belly with a knuckle, not a gentle tap. He’s half a foot taller than the driver and looms. “What did I say? You be nice, I’ll be nice. Didn’t I say that before? But I don’t have to be nice. Generally I’m not a nice person, or so the wife says. Generally I’m vicious.”

Vikström wasn’t scheduled to work this morning, but someone called in sick. Not that Vikström thinks the guy is sick. On a glorious day like this, he’s most likely gone for a walk on the beach, like Vikström wanted to do instead of getting bent out of shape by the guy on the motorcycle. No, that isn’t right, not by the guy himself—by the guy’s many little parts. Their confetti-like aspect makes him queasy.

Vikström’s gray suit coat brushes Pappalardo’s belly. “You mean you got excited and just couldn’t tell the difference between the brake and the gas? What kind of shit is that?”

Pappalardo again bobbles his head. His dyed black hair is held in a ponytail, which sways back and forth.

“I got big feet, just look at those feet.” The men stare at the feet, encased in old work boots with the shiny edges of the steel toes breaking through the leather. “D’you see many like that? Size fuckin’ fourteen. I’m lucky to get them in the cab.”

“So you killed this guy because you got big feet?”

“No way. He was going like a rocket. It’s, like, both our faults.”

“Maybe you were talking on your phone and not paying attention.”

“I lost my phone. I mean, it’s in my house someplace. I’m always losing it.”

Leon Pappalardo's sober, Vikström can tell that. He's Vikström's age, and he's nervous. But he's got a right to be nervous; maybe it's not guilty nervous, maybe it's *I fucked up* nervous. That's the main thing—for Vikström there's no clear reason to back up and hit the biker on purpose, which doesn't mean it didn't happen.

Firemen stand nearby holding a dry line, and by now the police have pushed the gawkers thirty feet up Bank Street. Vikström knows some, like Fidget and the cobbler and the black gay guy who runs an art gallery—what's his name?

Maurice, and who doesn't like it when Vikström calls him Mo—pause—*Reese*, which isn't a black thing like the guy thinks but goes back to the old cigarette ad: "Call for Phillip Mo—pause—*Reese*!"

Vikström sees his partner, Manny Streeter, talking to a man farther up the sidewalk, getting another version of the story. Vikström has already given the truck driver a ticket for reckless driving leading to an accident, which is a big ticket and could cost him his job, but Vikström would like to give him something bigger, if only because a guy got killed, though "rent asunder" was more accurate. As for the big-feet business, it's bullshit.

Vikström pats Pappalardo's stomach. "You a Budweiser man?"

Pappalardo looks up in surprise. "Sometimes. Mostly it's Nasty-gansett, the new Nasty-gansett."

"You're from Rhode Island?" Narragansett is a Rhode Island beer.

Again the driver looks surprised. "Brewster. It's on the coast, the first town up from Charlestown. I live in Brewster."

"I know Brewster," says Vikström. "I got friends there."

"Mostly it's a quiet place," says Pappalardo. "If you like quiet."

TWO

Connor Raposo's Mini-Cooper remains trapped. There's no getting it out until a lot of other cars are moved. He holds the dead man's motorcycle cap and stands on the curb near the cobbler's shop, trying not to be pissed off. Who's he going to get pissed off at, the dead guy on the Harley, Marco Santuzza? Connor has work to do, money to liberate from other people's pockets, like it or not, and he won't make a dime by standing around Bank Street.

A few feet to his left, the street is blocked with yellow cop tape, while on the other side of the dump truck is a red pumper and a hook and ladder, as well as a white TV truck. The Harley's busted fuel tank has spread gas over a patch of street, and the pumper is supposed to spray the pavement, but there's an ethical problem, says the fire marshal. Since maybe twenty pounds of dead guy's bits and pieces are stuck to the street, washing it down means sending ten percent of him into the sewer. So the fire marshal looks to ask permission, but he's not sure who to ask: maybe the mayor, maybe a priest. Actually, he's not looking for permission so much as looking for somebody else to share the blame. But that someone had better show up soon, because all that accelerant is a disaster waiting to happen.

Connor has already spoken to two detectives about what he saw, which was nothing except the flash of the Harley going by. One of them was Benny Vikström, the other was his partner, Manny Streeter. About twenty

people stand near Connor, and thirty more are in the street and on the opposite sidewalk. Half are drivers of blocked cars, others are gawkers. At the moment Connor stares at an old bum in a Red Sox cap swatting at something behind him, though Connor sees nothing behind him. The swatting is secretive and angry, and what seems especially odd is the old guy keeps looking in Connor's direction, though Connor is sure he's never seen him before.

Forensics specialists lift small, unidentifiable bits with tweezers and put them into plastic bags. Two TV film crews interview bystanders. Print journalists clutch notepads, and one young female reporter has a photographer in tow. When the TV people asked Connor what he'd seen, he said he hadn't seen anything and was only there to pick up some shoes.

Ambulance attendants stand on the other side of the tape, waiting to be told what to do, not that a stretcher will help. A mop and shovel would be better. Connor is struck at how he's gotten accustomed to the horror, but the Harley is hidden behind the cops and forensics guys, and he can almost imagine that the body is gone. The fact that the street is speckled with blood, tissue, and body parts is ghastly, but from this distance it's an intellectual understanding.

Many people's faces remain distorted by disgust, horror, and intense interest. Some have their eyes squinched half shut as if the scene's too bright; some are bug-eyed as if they can't get enough; some take videos with their smartphones. By afternoon they'll be on YouTube for the world to see.

Connor scratches a spot, a small lump, on the front of his leather jacket, that he suspects might be a dollop of gore. This seems unlikely, because he was inside the cobbler's shop when the crash occurred, though he got outside as fast as he could. Maybe the force of the accident threw bits of the motorcycle guy high in the air, where they hung for a moment before plummeting downward. With a little more picking, he realizes it's a dab of oatmeal from breakfast, and he laughs.

"I'm glad somebody thinks this is funny," says a man slightly behind him. "I just want to get the fuck out of here."

Connor turns to see shiny black hair swept back from a brow, a pompadour vaguely like Elvis's. The pompadour's owner is shorter than Connor, and the hair, adding a few inches to his height, is at eye level. Connor realizes he knows this man, but he keeps his face blank till he's sure the guy isn't part of a work-related problem, which is why he and his friends left San Diego in the first place.

Connor explains his confusion, that what he thought was a dollop of gore turns out to be a dollop of oatmeal. He laughs again, but mostly he wants to know where he's seen this guy. It wasn't on the West Coast, he's sure of it, and it wasn't recently. In fact, it's the hair he remembers, and then, gradually, he recalls the rest: black caterpillar eyebrows, flat shovel nose, thin lips, square chin, and a restless shifting of his shoulders as if he were preparing to slug someone.

The man wears a black shirt with the top button unbuttoned to display some gold chains. He has a tan jacket folded over his arm, and he holds it up, which shows off a gold Rolex. "The jacket's got maybe twenty spots on it, blood and other shit. I could get it cleaned, but I wouldn't like the memory."

Connor sees blood spots on the lapels and takes note of the Rolex. "You must have been standing close."

"Close enough."

"Is your car stuck here?"

“Fuckin’ right.” The man points. “It’s the hunka junk in front of that toy car.”

Connor pauses a beat, then says, “That happens to be my toy car.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t mean to insult your wheels. No offense.”

“None taken. Looks like your car’s had a lot of use.” The Chevy Caprice must have a broken suspension system: each of its four corners is at a different height.

“What my car’s got is bigness. It’s the cop package. Full of power.”

“It must have its advantages.”

“Yeah, no one’s going to steal it, but right now the battery’s dead. It drains quick if it’s sitting. I didn’t think I’d be here so long. Is that the guy’s cap?”

Connor puts on the cap. “Just a souvenir. It fits pretty well.”

“Dead man’s cap. I saw him go by. It’s bad luck.” The man pats his hair in case any strands are out of place. Several gold-nugget rings twinkle.

Connor laughs. “I’ll take the chance. Did you know the guy?” The man has no trace of a New England accent. If anything, it sounds like the Midwest, squeezing words together and giving “dead” two syllables.

“Nah, but I’d recognized the bike. Fat Bob.”

“Is that his name?”

“It’s what they call the bike—it’s the model.”

The fact the bike has a name makes it real again. It’s like two people being killed. “You saw the accident?” asks Connor.

Another train approaches, and its horn blasts them into a few seconds of silence. Then the man says, “I was looking in the music store. My kid wants a trombone so he can march in the school band. You know how kids are. So my back was to the street. I turned when the truck came out of the alley and the biker hit his brakes.”

“It must have been awful.”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

During this talk Connor keeps trying to place the man. It’s an expanding question that he can’t set aside. For the past year, Connor had a black mustache that he kept to please his girlfriend. When they broke up before he left San Diego, Connor shaved it off. However, he’d grown used to smoothing it back with his index finger and thumb, and though Connor has lost the mustache, he’s kept the gesture. He’s doing it now. It’s a gesture that accompanies thought.

“You ever been in Detroit? There’s a guy you remind me of.”

“What’s his name?”

“I never knew. He was a guy I’d see around the casino. Maybe he’s a relative.” But Connor knows that while a relative might have the man’s height, eyebrows, and nose, he wouldn’t have the pompadour.

“I don’t know any family in Detroit. I’m from Saint Louis.”

“Never been there. I’m from Minneapolis,” says Connor, who was actually from Cleveland. He sticks out his hand. “Name’s Connor Raposo.”

The man’s handshake is almost painful. “I’m Sal Nicoletti. You Italian?”

“Pork and cheese.”

The caterpillar eyebrows go up half an inch. “Say what?”

“My dad was Portuguese. He liked to call it ‘pork and cheese.’”

“Funny guy.”

“Yeah, sometimes.”

Connor is sure he hasn’t heard the name Sal Nicoletti before, but he’s also pretty sure he’s seen this man in a Detroit casino, probably the MGM Grand, where Connor worked for a year. “I used to have a Harley, a small one. I had a few close calls and got uncomfortable on it. So I sold it.”

Connor continues to talk, easygoing and disengaged, the way men talk when they are waiting for something else to happen: a car repair, a ball game. Sal’s office overlooks the river, which is a good thing, but it’s also about twenty yards from the train tracks, a bad thing. “Fuckin’ train horn knocked me outta my chair the first coupla times.” But Connor’s mind keeps grinding away, seeking a clearer memory. Sal’s in his mid-thirties, wears jeans, a black shirt, and genuine eelskin boots, which add several inches to his height. All Connor can recollect about the person he’s trying to recall is something’s not right about him, something destructive.

No way it wasn’t an accident. You kiddin’ me? Course it’s an accident.” Detective Manny Streeter is talking to his partner, Benny Vikström, next to the dump truck. “Where’s your evidence?” Manny’s a stocky fellow and walks like a brick on legs. His chin, mouth, and nose, even his eyebrows and ears, seem oversize, and he shaves his head to conceal his hair loss, going bald by choice rather than be “fucked over by the fickle finger of fate,” as he’s said more than once. He wears a blue suit, and the jacket is open to expose a silver belt buckle the size of a fist with a replica of James Earle Fraser’s *End of the Trail*, showing a dying, spear-carrying Indian on a skeletal, staggering pony. It’s so distinctive that most people notice the belt buckle before noticing Manny.

“I don’t have any evidence,” says Vikström, “but we’ll keep looking.” He now carries his jacket over his shoulder because of the heat. They’ve been at the scene two hours, and it’s past noon. Having talked to some people and picked up what information they could find, they’re ready for lunch. But the information isn’t much. A truck backed out of an alley, and a man on a motorcycle crashed into it. The dead man’s name seems to be Robert Rossi, which is the name Vikström gets when he calls in the plate number. But the victim’s wallet is missing, and this bothers the detectives. The wallet was attached by a chain to the biker’s belt loop, and only a bit of chain remains. Presumably the chain snapped and the wallet was flung somewhere. Just like the head. They’ve directed a few policemen to look for it.

“So let’s say it was premeditated,” says Manny. “What’s the motive? Why’d he come barreling down this

street instead of another? And the driver—what’s his name, Poppaloppa?—you think he’s got the brains to plan this? No way, José.”

“Lardo.”

“Say again?”

“Pappalardo.”

“Whatever.”

Vikström, with his mind on lunch, leans back against the truck. Just as he’s getting comfortable, his face changes; a memory has struck him. He turns quickly and says, “Do I got that dead guy all over me?”

Manny inspects the back of Vikström’s white shirt. “Well, maybe here and there. Some red spots, a few sort of grayish. But they don’t look bad. I mean, they don’t look like parts of a dead guy.” Manny keeps a straight face in such a way that Vikström can see that Manny is trying to keep a straight face.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Vikström twists his neck, attempting to see the back of his shirt. He thinks he sees a suspicious blotch that wasn’t there before. “You could’ve said something when you saw me leaning back.”

“I thought you knew.”

“You thought I’d been leaning on top of the dead guy on purpose?”

“I figured you’d already checked out the truck, know what I mean?”

“No,” Vikström says, “I don’t.”

We should step back and look at this exchange, because it’s at the center of their relationship. Manny tries to drive Vikström crazy, Vikström tries to ignore it. They’ve had many such exchanges that conclude with Vikström feeling diminished in a small way. Vikström’s sure Manny does it on purpose, but he’s not *totally* sure, and of course Manny denies it. For Vikström such exchanges add needless tension and distrust; for Manny they add moments of joy.

Vikström and Streeter have worked together ten months, but they’ve never been close. Vikström thinks Manny’s too competitive, meaning too ambitious, while Manny thinks Vikström is too loosey-goosey or goosey-loosey, he can’t recall which, but it means Vikström follows his intuition while Manny likes everything down on paper. That’s how it was at the start; then it got worse.

Vikström wants to strip off his shirt to look for splotches. Instead he bends his features into a semblance of indifference. He’s pretty sure that Manny has done this business about not warning him on purpose, and he’s sure that Manny knows that he knows, which is Manny’s ambition.

“I’m not saying the accident was premeditated,” says Vikström, as if nothing has happened, “but neither am I saying it *wasn’t* premeditated. The driver wasn’t telling the truth, or all of it, and I’d like to spend more time digging around.”

“How’d he know the Fat Bob was coming? How’d he time it?”

Vikström shrugs. Manny hates it when Vikström says, *I just got a funny feeling about this one*, so he says, “I

got a funny feeling about this one.”

They walk back up Bank Street to where the trapped cars are being freed. Vikström furtively wipes the back of his shirt and then inspects his hand. Nothing. Two cops direct traffic. Cars honk. Soon the truck will be towed to a garage where its brakes, accelerator, and clutch will be checked. But right now the forensics guys are still picking up bits of Robert Rossi, and technically, as Vikström says, the truck should be sent to the morgue along with a good hunk of pavement. Manny doesn't laugh; outside the confines of his home, he limits his humor to irony, sarcasm, and mockery. Both men have considered transferring to another section, but each wants to remain in the Detective Bureau, so each waits for the other to make the first move.

Up ahead they see Fidget collecting spare change from people whose cars remain stuck. Fidget slaps at something behind him, level with his coccyx.

“I bet he's got fleas,” says Manny, who doesn't want to get too close.

“Hey, Fidget,” calls Vikström, “hold up. I want to talk to you.”

Without turning his head, Fidget hurries forward, but his knees are iffy and keeping them stiff makes him look as if he's walking on stilts.

Vikström catches up with him and puts a hand on his shoulder. “Going deaf?”

“Jeez, Detective, this is prime picking time. If I don't get these people now, they'll be gone.”

Vikström shakes Fidget's arm. “What'd you see when the bike hit the truck?”

“Bike?”

“The motorcycle,” says Manny, “the motorcycle!”

“Yeah, I saw the Harley hit the truck. Is that what you're talking about? It was awful. I got blood on my coat.”

Vikström and Manny look at the multilayers of gray that cover the once-beige raincoat with an impasto effect. No bloodstains are visible, which doesn't mean they aren't part of the porridge.

“I mean, did you see anything you should tell us about?” asks Vikström.

Fidget swats a hand behind him to quiet his tail that's flicking back and forth like a twenty-foot bullwhip. He knows what Vikström is saying, but he also knows if he has any chance to turn this event into cash, he has to keep quiet. “What's to tell? I saw a Harley smash into a dump truck and a biker turned to splop. What's more to say than that?”

THREE

The gravel access road to the Hannaquit Breachway is the victim of months of bad weather and resembles, to Connor's mind, a long ravioli mold with indentations on either side. Half are filled with water, and Connor steers his Mini-Cooper around them as he heads toward the beach. At times he's thrown against his seat belt; at other times he's bounced up to bang against the roof. As protection he wears the black motorcycle cap from the accident. It helps a little.

On a ridge above the water, a white, older model Winnebago Journey has been drawn into a campground parking slot reserved for self-contained RVs. The campground, of course, is closed for the season, but Connor was told that an assortment of deals had been made, the truth of various falsehoods had been asserted, and bogus regulations had been upheld, all of which had permitted them to park illegally. When he questioned this, he was informed that the coast of Rhode Island was full of fellow Portuguese and that close associates had settled matters. In any case, the details hardly signified, because now, with a salt pond behind it and the ocean in front, the thirty-nine-foot Winnebago with two open slides is the sole vehicle in residence, which is how Connor's friends like it.

It's four-thirty, and Connor hasn't eaten. Getting boxed in on Bank Street upset many plans. Still, he's rented a post office box in New London, picked up a rush order from a printer's, made various purchases, and acquired several telephone books.

It would be wrong to say that Connor's mind remains a blur from the accident that morning, but he suffers from a sort of double vision as the bloody display of the biker, disassembled and confettied against the side of the truck, is repeatedly projected upon the scene around him: blue sky, sand, and tall pines, a breeze rippling the surface of the salt pond, the ocean extending to the horizon. So Connor exists in a state of wince, with his hands clutching the steering wheel.

He parks behind the Winnebago next to a gray Ford Focus rental. The Winnebago is at the end of the breachway, while to the left are about twenty empty RV slots. Farther on stand a row of summer cottages on stilts. Connor pauses to admire a snowy egret pretending to be a bush at the edge of the pond; then he gathers his Bruno Magli slip-ons from the front seat and takes his parcels from the back. The phone books he'll get later. With arms full, he makes his way around the side of the Winnebago to the front door, which is open. It's low tide, and the sea does little more than slosh. Gulls seek snacks along the waterline. From somewhere comes a rhythmic *thump-thump-squeak*, over and over.

Sitting in a lawn chair by the door is a man or a boy in a bulky black sweatshirt with his back to Connor. He's small, and his straw-colored hair is mostly cowlick. Leaning forward, he focuses on a yellow pad of paper balanced on his lap.

The question of whether he is man or boy is a question asked by many. His cheeks are pink and show no sign of facial hair. If we touched them, we'd be struck by the smoothness of his skin, and if he stood up, we'd see he's five feet tall. But he doesn't seem short as much as unfinished, as if he were waiting for two or three more growth spurts to top him off. Nor does he seem short when he walks, because his step is purposeful and his back straight. He will look businesslike even in a casual dawdle along the beach. As we might suspect, he copies this from Connor, whom he admires, just as Connor has copied it from his brother Vasco, but the boy or young man exaggerates the walk to the point that, in motion, he appears robotic.

Observing him, we might think him anywhere between thirteen and thirty. His head is long and shaped like a loaf of bread, with a high forehead, a stub of a nose, and a round chin. Along with the sweatshirt, he wears jeans and pointed black boots. Oh, yes, his nails are clean and nicely trimmed. This wouldn't need to be said, but it's the result of obsessive behavior, so Connor thinks. The fellow spends hours keeping them perfect, filing and painting them with clear nail polish. Another thing: his left eye is blue and the other green, and at times he seems to glance at you with the blue one and at times with the other; and the blue eye shows his feelings as one way and the green shows they're another, but they never show the same together.

All in all, the man or boy is a mysterious fellow, and Connor, who has known him a month, hasn't figured him out, meaning he never knows what he's thinking, if he's thinking at all. The most Connor can say is he's pretty sure he has Asperger's, or something like it; on the other hand, he might be simply weird. As for his

name, or real name, Connor doesn't know it, though he and the couple inside the Winnebago call him Vaughn, because his voice has the same rippling, velvety baritone as the late singer Vaughn Monroe; and whenever Vaughn speaks, Connor feels a faint thrill, the same as he felt years ago when he first heard Vaughn Monroe sing "Riders in the Sky," which was one of Connor's granddad's favorite songs. But Vaughn, or whatever his name is, has never heard of Vaughn Monroe. Or so he says.

Vaughn has another talent: numbers to him are what colors were to Van Gogh. He's a math whiz, which, for our purposes, means he's a whiz with computers and has developed formidable hacking skills. Perhaps he can't get into Pentagon computers or the computers of those pesky Russkies, but the computers of moderate-size businesses or organizations pose no problem. He's a twenty-first-century Peeping Tom. Not long ago he peeped for the sake of peeping, rather than for financial reward. But that's changed.

At the moment Vaughn is drawing squares on a yellow sheet of lined paper. These come in three shapes and are as exact as if measured with a ruler. The large squares form three across the top of the sheet and six down. Then three medium squares are in each of the large squares and three small squares are in each of the medium squares. But these are just today's squares. In his suitcase he has many other sheets of paper with squares of various sizes and configurations. When asked what they're for, Vaughn explains they represent his thoughts.

As Connor approaches, he asks, "Where's Didi?"

Vaughn turns and stares in Connor's direction, but he doesn't exactly look at Connor himself; instead his blue and green eyes stare at something past Connor's shoulder. Even after a month, Connor finds this unsettling, but he no longer turns to see who is behind him, though he may get a tingle in the back of his neck. Also, if an hour or more has passed since they were last together, Vaughn will act as though he's never seen Connor before. He does this now, as Connor smooths back the absent mustache that he shaved off when he split from his girlfriend. A moment goes by as Connor and Vaughn remain inert. Then Vaughn nods to the door of the Winnebago.

Again Connor hears *thump-thump-squeak, thump-thump-squeak*. "Eartha?"

But Vaughn is focused on the black motorcycle cap perched on the back of Connor's head. "What's that?"

Connor takes it off and turns it over in his hands. The red satin lining flickers in the sunlight. "A cap I picked up in New London."

"Can I have it?"

"Why should I give it to you?"

"It's my birthday."

"Is that so? How old are you?"

Vaughn continues to stare slightly over Connor's shoulder, and the stare seems as fixated as that of a snake hypnotizing a bird.

Connor can't think of a reason not to give Vaughn the cap, so he tosses it to him. "Happy birthday."

The noises from inside—*thump-thump-squeak*—continue.

Vaughn holds the cap up to the sun. "Who's . . . Mar-Co-San-Tuz-Za?"

“The previous owner. He doesn’t need it anymore.” In fact, thinks Connor, he has no head to put it on.

“It has blood spots.”

Connor hadn’t seen them earlier, but now, bending over, he sees a few dark spots on the brim. Vaughn licks a finger, rubs at a spot, and holds up the finger, which has a red blush on the tip.

“You want to give it back?” Connor asks him.

Vaughn puts on the cap. It’s too big for him and wobbles a little before coming to rest on his freckled ears. “I like blood.” He nods to Connor and claps a hand over his heart. “I’m internally grateful.”

Connor opens his mouth to speak and then changes his mind to say, “I’ve got phone books in the back of the car. Get them, will you?” Then he climbs the steps into the Winnebago and shouts, “All right, cut the racket! I’m home!” He crosses the floor to the dinette and empties a bag of cell phones onto the Formica surface of the table next to three laptop computers and a printer. From other bags he takes boxes of envelopes, order forms, receipts, and letterheads. The RV is a dozen years old, and the interior is shabby. The maple veneer peels from the cabinets and trim. Covering the couch, the love seat, and the cushions of the dinette set is an off-white plasticized cloth with gray baroque designs that resemble, in Connor’s mind, spiders and spiderwebs and are meant to camouflage stains, spills, smudges: the weekly overflow. The tan linoleum resembles tile, and it, too, has camouflage properties so it can go weeks without cleaning and the interior of the Winnebago might still seem presentable. A propane tank takes care of the stove and hot water.

Connor sleeps on the couch, which folds out into a double bed with a very thin mattress. Vaughn sleeps on the love seat. The others, whose names are Didi and Eartha, have a queen-size bed in the rear bedroom. The living area smells of grease with a stronger smell of mold. From the bathroom comes a disagreeable smell that Connor can’t identify. Perhaps a squirrel was trapped in the metallic maze of the Winnebago’s undercarriage and perished.

The bedroom door bangs open, and Didi appears. He’s Connor’s uncle, or that’s what he says, because two months ago Connor didn’t know he had an uncle by the name of Didi, which is short for Diogo. If anything, he might be his father’s cousin, since his name is Lobato rather than Raposo. But Connor’s father has six brothers, and no way can Connor keep track of them. Possibly Didi isn’t related at all, but Connor doubts this, because their business is a family business of many years’ standing and Didi claims to be Portuguese. “You’re a tugo; I’m a tugo,” he says.

Didi is about fifty and, as he says, “in tip-top shape”; he’ll also say his thick, silver-gray hair “is completely natural.” He parts it down the middle, creating swanlike silver wings at the sides of his head. His face is nearly a perfect oval; his nose is long and straight. The rims of his ears have small scoops at the back as if something had taken a bite from each. Didi tucks his T-shirt into his jeans and then zips his fly. He wears the self-satisfied expression of a man at peace with his libidinous wishes.

“Where the fuck you been?” he asks without animus.

“There was an accident in New London. My car got trapped.” Connor describes what happened as Didi goes to the refrigerator for a Dos Equis.

“You’re kidding,” Didi keeps saying, “you’re kidding!” He holds the beer out to Connor, who shakes his head. Didi flips off the bottle cap, throws back his head, and drinks.

Eartha emerges from the bedroom, interrupting Connor’s story. She’s a young black woman, and she’s naked

except for the bottom half of a red bikini; she twirls the top half in her hand. Under an arm is a rolled-up towel. “You think it’s warm enough to lie on the beach?”

Connor turns away, though he knows it doesn’t matter. Eartha often walks around naked, drying herself after a shower, braiding her hair, or even cooking up a couple of eggs at the stove. Vaughn never pays attention, nor does Didi for the most part, leaving Connor to think he’s being oversensitive and stodgy. But Eartha is a “black knockout,” which she repeats just as Didi repeats that he’s in tip-top shape. In fact, her skin is a rich bronze. Maybe she’s thirty. Her name isn’t really Eartha; she’s called that because she has a purr like Eartha Kitt. This is helpful in their work, which we’ll get to shortly. Her real name is Shaw-nell, though sometimes she says it’s Beatriz, a Brazilian name. And sometimes Didi says they’re distant cousins.

Connor finds it difficult not to look at Eartha’s breasts, which are melon-sized and nicely balanced. The nipples are pierced with silver nipple bars that have small rubies at the tips, which twinkle in the light. At times Connor thinks it’s the nipple bars with their ruby dollops that attract him, but this is unlikely. His interest isn’t aesthetic, which is why he turns away. He’s afraid Eartha will think he’s leering, and the occasion has not yet arisen when he can say it’s the nipple bars that interest him and not their mounts. Since they’ve been together for only two weeks, Connor tells himself he’ll soon get used to Eartha walking around naked, but so far it hasn’t happened. Didi has said the breasts have been enhanced by implants and “have a nice bounce to them.” But they look real enough to Connor.

Didi puts the empty beer bottle on the counter. “Connor saw a guy on a motorcycle smash into a garbage truck. He absolutely exploded.”

Eartha puts a hand to her mouth; her large brown eyes grow larger.

“It was a dump truck,” says Connor, “a green dump truck. The driver backed out of an alley and boom!”

Connor continues his story as Eartha puts on the top half of her bikini. Didi ties it for her. Vaughn has entered with the phone books from the car and has set them on the table. He seems not to be paying attention to the story, but Connor knows he always pays attention. Connor is annoyed that the banality of his words doesn’t convey the horror of the scene. “Boom!”—what the heck does that mean? He wants to exaggerate, gesticulate, make faces, but he does none of that. A guy on a Harley piled into the side of a truck. It cut him in two. The pieces flew all over. *I should have taken a video with my iPhone*, thinks Connor.

“I have his cap,” says Vaughn in his deep Vaughn Monroe voice. “Connor gave it to me for my birthday. It has blood on it.”

Eartha inspects the cap but sees no blood. Didi says, “Is today really your birthday?”

Vaughn looks shrewd. “I got a special condensation.”

There’s a general silence as the others consider making a comment and then don’t. After a moment Eartha says, “If you’d said something earlier, I’d have baked you a chocolate cake.”

Thirty minutes later Connor sits at a spot above the water where the grass meets the sand. He has a ham sandwich, a Dos Equis, and is practicing not looking at Eartha, who lies on a yellow towel nearer the water to his right. He likes her all right, but he has no romantic feelings. At the moment she’s stretched on her back; the ruby tips of the nipple bars sparkle, and her surgically enhanced breasts rise and fall with each breath, or maybe they’re affected by the movement of the tides, maybe the moon governs their rise and fall.

Connor ponders this and then turns away to free himself from their fleshy distraction, eat his ham sandwich, and study the ocean.

Directly across from him, he thinks, is Portugal, perhaps even Lisbon, where he's been twice to visit a great-aunt in Baixa, the old town. What he likes best about Lisbon is it allows him to forget the United States, to forget people and institutions who want something from him. Lisbon is a city full of strangers, which for Connor is its major appeal. His Portuguese is limited to "hello," "good-bye," and "thank you." Why know more than that? It solved a lot of problems and gave his brain a rest: a city of red roofs on the hillsides that glitter in the morning light.

But soon his thoughts drift from Lisbon to Sal Nicoletti in New London, or rather Nicoletti's mysterious familiarity. If Connor had in fact seen him in Detroit, then why did Sal lie about not having been there?

Earlier, when their cars were freed, Sal's battery had been dead just as he feared. It made only a clicking noise. Instead of calling a garage, Sal wanted to get a cab and go home, where he had another battery already charged in the garage.

"I'll give you a ride," Connor said, "if you don't mind riding in a toy car."

"As long as you got room for a dead battery."

So Sal opened the hood of the Caprice to display an engine that seemed to have been dipped in rust. He removed the battery and put it in the back of the Mini-Cooper. "I appreciate this. Like, you don't know me."

"No problem." Once they had turned around on Bank Street past Firehouse Square, Connor asked, "What's your office like? You said it faced the train tracks?"

"An office office."

Connor expected Sal to follow this up with a further remark about the view or the convenience or places to eat, but there was nothing. Sal had his eyes closed.

"You lived in New London for long?" asked Connor.

"No, not long. The wife's got family here."

"And you moved here from Saint Louis?"

"What're you gonna write, my life story?"

"Sorry. I'm just making conversation." He glanced at Sal, who had shut his eyes again. Earlier he and Sal had been involved in a certain amount of light chat: comments about the accident, questions about the missing head, and the general nuisance of the truck blocking the street. Now Sal's mood had changed.

Connor turned south on Ocean Avenue, which ran more or less parallel to the river: a mix of modest Victorian and early-twentieth-century houses; and then, past the railway tracks, larger Victorians with big lawns and big trees, still leafless in March, interspersed with brick ranch houses from the fifties. Sal lived on Glenwood Place, a loop of split-levels and ranch houses off Glenwood Avenue.

It was sunny, and the car's windows were down. Connor heard several chain saws tidying up from a February storm. On the sidewalk a woman in blue shorts pushed a jogging stroller in which a blond child snoozed. Connor's usual way of starting a conversation, especially with strangers, was to ask questions, so

he pressed ahead despite Sal's apparent irritation.

"You got kids?"

"Yeah."

"How many?"

"Boy an' a girl, little ones."

"They must keep you busy."

Sal stared straight ahead. "The trouble with talk like this, it's like eating air. It's got no content, no protein. What's the point?"

"Aren't you curious about people?"

"Not unless they got something I want."

"That's pretty cynical."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Outside sports and cars, I don't see the purpose."

"Talk's good for the jaw muscles. It keeps the face trim."

Sal kept staring straight ahead. "You're a funny guy," he said disagreeably.

Connor laughed. "Yeah, yeah, yeah."

Sal's house was a brick ranch house with a large and treeless lawn. A light blue Chrysler Town & Country was parked in the driveway next to a small red tricycle with a white seat. Connor pulled up behind the Chrysler.

"I'd invite you in," Sal said with no trace of sincerity, "but the place's a mess. Kids, know what I mean?"

"You want a ride back downtown?"

"No thanks, the wife'll do it."

They got out of the Mini, and Sal retrieved his battery from the back. Connor kept thinking about Detroit and the various places where he might have seen Sal. Robins chattered fragments of song in nearby leafless maples; their bits and pieces sounded like the hurried excuses of the guilty.

"Let me open the garage door."

"No thanks, I'll get it."

The screen door banged open, and a woman came out onto the steps. The sight brought Connor to an abrupt stop. What was most evident, after her beauty, was her height. She was at least six feet, easily taller than Sal, and she looked athletic. Perhaps she was a runner or played tennis. Her black hair hung past her shoulders. She wore white shorts and a white T-shirt. Her legs went on and on.

"Where's the Chevy?"

“Battery went dead downtown. I gotta change it.” He turned to Connor. “Thanks for the ride.”

The woman’s skin tone was dark, and Connor guessed she might be southern Italian or Greek. Her eyes were black, and her nose was straight. She gave him a half smile, as if she knew his thoughts. She had a large mouth and full, sensuous lips that Connor thought would be ugly when she got angry, like an activated wood chipper. But the smile was beautiful.

“Hey, Connor, you hear me? I said you can go now. Like, thanks for the ride.” Sal grinned, but his eyes were stony.

So Connor had gotten into the Mini again and reversed out of the driveway. His eyes, however, remained fixed on the woman talking to Sal. She glanced at him again, and he stared back. There was a sudden honking; Connor had nearly rammed into a mail truck.

FOUR

Connor, sitting above the ocean, decides that the way he’d looked at Sal’s wife isn’t the way he looks at Eartha. With the other woman, Connor had taken her in from her yellow flip-flops to her black hair. It wasn’t a generalized look; it was absorption. With Eartha his look is more focused, though she also is beautiful.

As if his thoughts have called her, Connor sees Eartha standing next to him.

“Mind if I sit down?” She has draped the yellow towel over her shoulders, and it remains slightly open. Connor finds this more evocative than the bare breasts. He wonders if there’s something wrong with him.

“Of course not.”

“It’s getting colder, don’t you think?” She crosses her arms over the towel.

“It’s supposed to snow tomorrow. A real storm.”

“That’s great. It never snows in San Diego. I’ve only seen it on mountains.”

“You can get tired of it pretty quickly.”

The purr of Eartha’s voice generates a vibration in Connor’s duodenum. He wonders if that’s the effect she produces on the phone. But of course it is; that’s why Didi brought her along. Just like Vaughn, she has a skill that Didi intends to use.

“I stuck my foot in the water and nearly froze it off.”

Connor makes a sympathetic grunt and keeps his eyes on the ocean.

“It must have been terrible for you this morning, seeing that man killed.”

“I expect it’s the worst thing I’ve ever seen, and I didn’t even see it. I heard the crash and ran outside.”

“And it was an accident?”

“I guess so, but I heard two cops talking, two detectives, and they weren’t sure—at least one of them wasn’t.”

“Like it was murder?” She says this in almost a whisper.

“I doubt it. The detectives weren’t sure, that’s all I can say.” Through this exchange Connor looks at the water, then at a tree, and then at his feet. He and Eartha are silent a moment.

Eartha clears her throat, a theatrical noise, a soft-palate growl. “Does it bother you, I mean me sitting here? You don’t look at me.”

Connor laughs. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be rude. I think I’ve got a fixation.”

Eartha glances down at her towel-covered breasts. “You mean my boobs?”

Connor laughs again, but his laughter has a metallic quality, a palpable insincerity. “That’s right.”

“That’s what they’re for, the implants, to cause fixations. Before, they were nice enough but pretty usual, know what I mean? Not too big, not too small.”

“There’s nothing usual about them now.”

Eartha nods with satisfaction. “That’s what I wanted.”

“You’re not afraid it makes you a kind of stereotype?”

“Like a sexpot? Jesus, Connor, who the fuck cares? I like being looked at.”

They go back to staring at the ocean. The tide has turned, and the sloshing is louder. Soon they’ll have to move.

Connor says, “I saw an incredibly beautiful woman this afternoon, and I can’t even remember her breasts. I don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad thing.”

“What made her beautiful?”

“Everything: her face, her body, her hair. And she had incredible legs.”

“You’re a romantic,” says Eartha. “That can be a problem. I bet she leaves her dirty underwear on the floor just like I do. She burps, farts, and has messy periods. Really, Connor, you’ve got to imagine the whole package.”

—

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Bethany Hall:

In other case, little folks like to read book *Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel*. You can choose the best book if you love reading a book. Provided that we know about how is important any book *Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel*. You can add information and of course you can around the world by the book. Absolutely right, since from book you can know everything! From your country until foreign or abroad you will find yourself known. About simple matter until wonderful thing you can know that. In this era, we could open a book or

perhaps searching by internet unit. It is called e-book. You may use it when you feel weary to go to the library. Let's study.

Roman Leonard:

This Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel tend to be reliable for you who want to be described as a successful person, why. The explanation of this Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel can be one of several great books you must have is definitely giving you more than just simple looking at food but feed you with information that might be will shock your prior knowledge. This book will be handy, you can bring it everywhere and whenever your conditions in e-book and printed kinds. Beside that this Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel forcing you to have an enormous of experience like rich vocabulary, giving you tryout of critical thinking that could it useful in your day action. So , let's have it and luxuriate in reading.

Richard Martinez:

Your reading 6th sense will not betray an individual, why because this Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel guide written by well-known writer whose to say well how to make book that may be understand by anyone who all read the book. Written in good manner for you, leaking every ideas and publishing skill only for eliminate your own hunger then you still hesitation Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel as good book not merely by the cover but also through the content. This is one publication that can break don't assess book by its cover, so do you still needing a different sixth sense to pick this kind of!? Oh come on your reading sixth sense already said so why you have to listening to a different sixth sense.

Randy Acevedo:

In this era globalization it is important to someone to receive information. The information will make a professional understand the condition of the world. The healthiness of the world makes the information easier to share. You can find a lot of personal references to get information example: internet, classifieds, book, and soon. You can see that now, a lot of publisher that print many kinds of book. Typically the book that recommended to you is Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel this publication consist a lot of the information of the condition of this world now. This book was represented how does the world has grown up. The language styles that writer make usage of to explain it is easy to understand. The particular writer made some exploration when he makes this book. Honestly, that is why this book ideal all of you.

Download and Read Online Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel By Stephen Dobyns #NKD59OVE78M

Read Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel By Stephen Dobyns for online ebook

Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel By Stephen Dobyns Free PDF d0wnl0ad, audio books, books to read, good books to read, cheap books, good books, online books, books online, book reviews epub, read books online, books to read online, online library, greatbooks to read, PDF best books to read, top books to read Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel By Stephen Dobyns books to read online.

Online Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel By Stephen Dobyns ebook PDF download

Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel By Stephen Dobyns Doc

Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel By Stephen Dobyns Mobipocket

Is Fat Bob Dead Yet?: A Novel By Stephen Dobyns EPub