

POPPA

John Boston

Jim wasn't sure why he was even here. He was desperate. He was angry and sad at the same time. Some days he was more depressed than angry, some days it was the other way around. None of it mattered at this point. Nothing would really ever matter again to him. Little Eric was gone. He was only nine years old and he was gone from this world forever. God must surely hate him, why else would he do something as cruel as to take his only son from him? He wasn't sure where Eric was now, but wherever he was, he hoped he wasn't with God. He and the man upstairs had a serious falling out years ago and he hoped Eric's death wasn't the result of that falling out.

This was bordering on ridiculous. Maybe even delusional. The voodoo priest was probably a con artist. Most religious people are, in Jim's opinion. Still, he had come all this way, he may as well hear him out. If he wanted money, Jim would just walk out. He was desperate, but he wasn't stupid.

They decided to meet in this coffee bar downtown, near the university. He felt like a fish out of water. He could smell pot and coffee. Not like the kind he had at home, this was like ten dollars a cup type of coffee. *The good shit.*

The girl had a nose ring and some tattoos on her arm. She looked like she lived in the place.

"Whatcha having?" she asked with a smile.

"Fairtrade hazelnut, please," he said.

"Coming up, anything else?"

"No, that's all. Well, there is one more thing....I'm looking for someone named Luther? Do you know him?" asked Jim, handing her the money.

"He's in back," she said pointing.

She handed him his coffee. He put some creamer in and headed in back, which was separated by some string beads.

Luther just looked up at him and waved him in. He was having a heated discussion with someone in French on his cell.

"I'll call you back, I got business," he said and put the phone down.

"Are you Jim?" he asked with a heavy Jamaican accent.

"Yes, are you Luther?"

"Yes."

"Then you know why I am here."

"Not really, no."

Jim sat down and very painfully recounted the events of the last four years. He went over everything, the day Eric died, the funeral, his divorce, his being laid off. It had not been an easy time for Jim, not in the least.

"I'd be living in a van down by the river, but I can't even afford a van," he said chuckling.

Luther listened intently, to every word, not interrupting him once, except to light up a cigarette. When Jim was done, Luther took a sip of his coffee and looked at him right in the eye.

"What is it you want from me, Jim?" he asked

"I know I am not very knowledgeable about this voodoo stuff. I just want my son back. That's all. If you can help me, I would very much appreciate it." said Jim with tears in his eyes.

"Jim, I am a priest, not a magician. I cannot bring a dead person back to life. That stuff only happens in the movies."

"Please, Luther.....I've given up on just about everything. The only reason I haven't thrown myself in front of a bus is because I believe somewhere, somehow it is possible to bring my son back to life. Christ, if we can put a fucking man on the moon, we should be able to figure this out." said Jim, sobbing.

Luther looked at Jim, with both pity and disgust. It was a look he knew all too well.

"How far are you willing to go?"

"I'll do whatever it takes. I don't have much money, but what I do have is yours if you can bring him back. I've been to three psychics, they were all a waste of money. You're my last hope.....please! I've heard, you're the real deal. You a real voodoo priest. If anyone can do this, it's you." said Jim.

"Look, man....." Luther stopped mid-sentence. When he began speaking again, his accent was gone.

"Look, I went to Berkley. I did all the bullshit, got the degree, let me tell you, man, white people don't know shit about shit. This stuff is real, I mean it's as real as nuclear power. It can be just as powerful. You sure you want to go sticking your finger in this? This stuff is no joke. How far are you willing to go?" he asked again.

"All the way. I'll die, just to see my son, one last time."

Luther sat back in his chair. It was like Jim had finally said what he wanted to hear.

Luther got up and went over to a desk. He pulled out an old briefcase and rummaged through the papers. He took one out and handed it to Jim. It was very old, written in French.

"This was written by my great grandfather. He was a priest also. Very wise. I must advise you again to reconsider what you are about to do. Once these events are set in motion, I cannot undo them, you are at the mercy of the Gods, do you understand?"

Jim just looked at the paper.

Luther grabbed him.

"DO YOU UNDERSTAND?" he shouted.

"Yes. What do I owe you?" Jim said softly.

"I would not feel right taking money from a dead man," he said and watched Jim leave the little room where he had his office.

It took him four hours to get back home. He still had to translate the old document. Whoever wrote it had impeccable handwriting and it was fairly easy to read. He used the internet to translate the words. The instructions were sparse but very direct. He was to place a doll or something in the center of a circle. He was to use the blood of an animal that had recently been killed as a sacrifice. He is to put as many of Eric's personal belongings in the circle with the doll as well. He was to use his own blood, drip it on the doll, and recite the prayer at exactly midnight. Not one minute before or after. He set his watch to GMT.

"You have to want it to work. You are summoning to gods. You are asking them to do you a favor and return your son's soul to this doll. You have to get their attention, be polite, but be firm. You Won't get a second chance." said Luther over the phone.

When everything was done and in place, Jim looked at what he had done and it was surreal, even to him. He had shot a dog on the way home from work and used its blood in the cup. Up until this point in his life, he had only swatted flies and mosquitoes, and now here he was a dog killer. He had slaughtered a defenseless animal and still, he had yet to hit bottom.

He bought the biggest doll he could find, which was a ventriloquist's dummy. He had done everything exactly as the paper had described. He had checked it and double-checked it. He used a straight razor to slice open his thumb and let the blood drip on the doll. He could feel the energy in the room.

"Don't get caught up in the moment. You are there to do business, you must remember that. It's like you're about to step into a room full of powerful businessmen and tycoons. You have to impress them. The gods are no different."

Jim waited until exactly 11:50 PM before he started chanting. He started slowly, then he began chanting louder and louder until he was nearly screaming it.

"RETURN MY SON TO ME! RETURN MY SON TO ME! RETURN MY SON TO ME!" he screamed

At exactly midnight he started the prayer and dripped his blood on the doll. He said the prayer three times just like the instructions told him to.

"Watch the candles. If one of them is out, they heard your prayer and will send him back. You will know soon enough." said Luther.

Jim opened his eyes and looked at the candles. Much to his amazement, two were blown out and just smoking. He was ecstatic. He felt like singing. He could barely contain himself. The instructions said to wait until the morning before returning to the sacred circle. He headed upstairs. He drank himself to sleep that night. It was the only way. He was so wired, he would never have gone to bed. He finished off a bottle of scotch and smoked a cigar. Tomorrow was a big day.....*a very freaking big day* as far as Jim Kilabrew was concerned.

He opened his eyes at 7:50 AM. His head hurt. He wanted a cigarette, even though he didn't smoke. He felt like a child who has just been punished and you knew you deserved it too. What in the hell had he done? Is this really what his life had come to?

"Christ, Jimbo, you just shot somebody's freaking dog.....wouldn't momma be proud?".

He walked downstairs and poured himself a cup of coffee. He had the timer set for exactly 7 AM every morning. He sat down on the table and sipped his coffee. It had come to this. Going to see some scam artist voodoo priest who saw somebody as desperate as him a mile away. Still, the man was decent enough not to take any of his money, Jim owed him that much.

He rubbed his eyes and looked out the window where he and Eric used to play catch. He hadn't mowed the grass in weeks. He didn't care. He didn't care about grass or dealing with the neighbors, or much of anything else these days. He was a broken man, in more ways than one. Maybe if his wife hadn't blamed him for Eric's death, maybe if his boss had been just a little more understanding.....*maybe if God had been a little more understanding*.

Maybe this giant pile of shit that was his life could have been cleaned up.

He talked to people. He talked to a grief counselor. He talked to a psychologist. He talked and talked, but at the end of the day, it didn't make Eric any less dead. He knew he had to get on with his life, not that there was much of a life left. His wife blamed him for leaving Eric unattended for five minutes. Five goddamn minutes was all it took to completely destroy his life. He would give one of his testicles to have those five minutes back.

Sometimes in his dreams, he will relive that horrible day, when the paramedics arrived and told them there was nothing more they could do.

The ER doctors told him there was nothing more they could do. Nobody, including himself, really tried to revive him. The paramedics had a defibrillator, they never used it. They said Eric was too young. Idiots.....idiots and clowns. He was dead, what the hell difference was it going

to make? Even if they brought him back, he would never be the same. His brain had been deprived of oxygen for too long. Maybe it was for the best. It was just God's will.

He finished another cup of coffee and decided to go downstairs and clean up the mess he made, trying to shelve this mess away in the back of his mind. He turned on the light and walked downstairs, as soon as he hit the bottom step, he saw him. He almost dropped his cup. *Eric was sitting in the circle.* Jim nearly had a heart attack.

This cannot be happening.....I must be dreaming. This is just another one of those horrible dreams I keep having. I'm going to wake up in a few seconds and this will all be over.

"Poppa?" said Eric.

Jim collapsed on the ground. He wanted to laugh, shit, and cry all at the same time. He ran over to Eric and hugged him as hard as he could.

"Eric, how.....how did you get here?"

"You brought me here, poppa," he said.

"I know, but.....you're right.....I did. Are you okay?"

"Sure.....I've been sitting here a long time. Can I see mommy?" he asked.

"Well, Eric.....mommy doesn't live here anymore. She moved away. After you....well, after you left us, things got very bad around here. Mommy needed some time to be away, to try to make some sense of all this."

"Oh.....I understand. Do you want to play some board games?" he asked

"Of course.....I'd love to," he said and scooped up his son.

He carried him upstairs. Eric was still naked, so Jim brought him some clothes. They had saved just a few of his favorite things, including his MONSTER MARBLES tee shirt. That was his favorite game.

He and Eric sat down and began playing. It was as if the last two years had never happened. They played for at least an hour. Eric had gotten much better at the marble game. He beat Jim three games in a row.

"Poppa, did you forget how to play?" asked Eric.

"I guess I am a little rusty. Eric, would you like something to eat or drink? Maybe some hot cocoa? It was your favorite."

"No thanks. I'm not hungry."

"Eric....can you tell poppa where you have been all this time?"

"Poppa, you know you shouldn't ask me that. You should just be happy I am here," said Eric smiling.

"Oh, I am....I'm very happy. Happier than you will ever know."

"All that matters is that I am here now," said Eric.

"Yes, son. Of course. I was just being silly. Want to play something else?"

"Sure, how about some cards?"

"I've still got your favorite deck," said Jim

He left just for a moment. When he returned, Eric was staring out the window.

"Poppa.....how am I going to play outside, when everyone thinks I'm dead?"

"Well, you can still play outside. We just have to be a little more careful. Maybe play at a new playground. One where no one will recognize you."

"It's okay, poppa. I don't really want to go outside anyway. There's a lot of bad people out there. Very bad people. I'm much safer in here."

"Yes, of course, you are. How bout some gin rummy?"

"You bet," said Eric.

"Poppa, why are you crying?" asked Eric.

"Oh, just my darn allergies. They really act up this time of year," said Jim.

Jim spent the next four hours trying to figure out how this all happened. He was playing cards with his dead son. But how can he be dead if he's right here in front of him? Jim had suddenly developed a new and very profound sense of respect for voodoo.

He just wasn't sure how all of this would work out. He had just started a new job and couldn't afford to be fired. His credit cards were maxed out. The divorce and job loss had devastated him financially. He really had no choice, he had to go to work in the morning. He just wasn't sure how all of this would affect Eric. He made dinner and was surprised that Eric had not eaten. Jim thought it odd. Eric was always hungry, well the old Eric anyway. Jim didn't want to pry or force anything on his son. He was just happy to have him back. For the first time in two years, Jim felt like a real human being again. He was happy. All he needed was his dead son to be brought back to life. Still, he had to talk to Eric. They had to figure out how all of this was going to work. Eric was watching TV when Jim sat down next to him.

"Son, I think it's important that we lay down some rules here. We don't want people to know that you're back. If anyone comes to the door, you just ignore them. No matter how persistent they are, just ignore them. There won't be any cars in the driveway, so no one will assume you're

home. If someone does come inside the house, you know you have to hide. We can't afford to have anyone see you, do you understand?"

"Of course, poppa. I'll be careful. You be careful too."

"What do you mean?"

"People are going to know something has changed with you. You've been so sad for so long, people will be surprised when you are happy."

"I see, you're right. How do you know I've been sad?"

"I watched you. You couldn't see me or hear me, but I was here," he said and turned to watch his favorite cartoon.

"Okay. I've got food and that orange juice you like in the fridge. You have my phone number. You know how to get a hold of me if you need me, right?"

"Yes, father. Now, let's watch the KADOODLES. You know it's my favorite cartoon."

"Eric, it's getting late. Bedtime soon."

"Oh, poppa, don't be silly. I don't need to sleep. That's for people like you and mommy."

Jim was caught off guard. *Hell, everyone needs sleep?*

He decided to let Eric have this round. He laid down on the couch in front of the TV. It was just past eleven o'clock when he passed out. He woke up at five-thirty. Eric had not moved from the couch. He was still watching cartoons.

"Eric.....what? Didn't you go to sleep?"

"Poppa, I told you, I don't need to go to sleep. I'm special."

"Yes, son. You sure are," said Jim as he sat down next to his son and hugged him.

Two hours and several cups of coffee later, Jim was on his way to work. He knew he should have just called out, but he was already on thin ice with his boss anyway. He had called out too many times over the past six months. If his sales record wasn't as good as it was, he was sure they would have let him go. Even though he was drunk and clinically depressed most of the time, he still had a better sales record than the rest of the staff. He had found that the key with sales was to just sell yourself. No one needs fancy shutters or security blinds, but Jim convinced them that because they needed him, they needed them. The cheapest ones came with a two thousand dollar price tag. The most expensive were two or three times that amount. Jim wasn't just a salesman, he was also the financial wizard that made the payments possible.

"All you have to do is make the minimum monthly payment. That's it!"

That's all people needed to hear. They were already up to their eyeballs in debt, what difference does twenty dollars a month more make?

His sales had been so good, his company even gave him a free set of security shutters for free. Still, the pay was crap. He was barely pulling in half of what he used to make selling cars. He liked selling cars. He was good at it. This was just a waste of his time. He had fallen off the wagon badly and needed to get back on it and quickly. He now had another mouth to feed.

He was sitting at his desk when it suddenly occurred to him that Eric had access to a phone. The old cell phone they had bought for him two weeks before his death. It was for emergencies only. It had both his and his wife's cell number in there. Christ, if he were to call her, there's no telling what would happen. He knew he had to get home and fast. He had to think of an excuse to get home. He checked his email, then it occurred to him. It was brilliant. He put on his jacket, shut off his computer, and left the office. He passed by his asshole boss on his way out the door. His boss was with one of the owners of the company. Jim had to be quick on his feet.

"Jim, where are you going? Leaving early again?"

"I'm meeting with Kellog."

"Who's that?"

"Jack Kellog.....Kellog Homes and Properties? Ring a bell?"

"You have a meeting with Jack Kellog?."

"Yup. They're putting in a hundred new homes near the river. Paradise Valley Estates? Anyway, he's taking bids for security shutters and blinds. Wants to have them as a pre-installed option. I thought it might be good for business, good for my paycheck too."

His boss and the owner were both stunned. They had been trying to get a meeting with Mr. Kellog for months.

"Don't screw it up." said his boss.

"I won't." said Jim.

He couldn't stand that little asshole, but he had to play the game, at least for now. That could all change as soon as he and Eric figured out what they were going to do. He knew leaving his son, who had only hours before, been brought back to life from the dead, home and home alone, was probably not a good idea. He needed to check up on his little buddy.

He came home and opened the front door. He didn't see Eric. A bolt of fear went through him: *what if he decided to go outside? Yeah, that could definitely get a little dicey.*

"Eric? Where are you?" he asked

He got no response. Jim was now just a little more than worried. *Shit stricken* might be a better word to use.

"Eric.....ERIC!"

Jim raced all over the house. He turned to Eric's room and saw him playing with his trucks and cars in the hallway. He could almost feel the heart attack coming on.

"Eric.....when daddy calls, you have to answer me. I thought you....."

"Daddy, I'm not dumb. I know I can't go outside," he said and continued playing with his cars and trucks.

"Are you hungry or thirsty? Would you like me to make you peanut butter and jelly sandwiches?"

"No thanks, I'm not hungry. I killed a rat. Two of them actually. Want to see?"

"You killed two rats? In the house?"

"No, they were in the garage. I think they were trying to steal your other car."

"What are you talking about?"

Eric said nothing and continued playing with his cars. Jim turned and quickly walked as fast as he could to the garage. He slowly opened the garage door and turned on the light.

Jim was horrified at what he saw. He put his hand over his mouth to muffle his scream. The garage was a butcher shop. He stepped over a severed arm with the hand still attached. There was blood everywhere.

"Sweet merciful Christ," Jim said softly.

He walked around the garage, stepping over limbs and even a severed head.

He turned and saw Eric standing at the garage doorway into the house.

"Eric.....what the hell happened in here?"

"I told you. They were trying to steal your car. I stopped them." he said

"Eric, you barely weigh 80 pounds. How in the hell did you manage to kill two grown men?" said Jim in shock.

"They made me angry father. I told them they needed to leave. I wasn't going to call the police, obviously. One of them pushed me. He made me very angry. I pulled his tongue out." said Eric.

"You did what?"

"The other one tried to stab me. I just laughed. You can't kill someone who is already dead." said Eric.

"Eric, dear God boy, what have you done?"

"Poppa, I was just being smart. Besides, I found this on one of them. He won't be needing it now." said Eric and handed his father a huge wad of hundred-dollar bills. They were covered in blood.

"They had all this money on them?"

"Yes. One of them had their driver's license. Here it is." said Eric as he handed his father the license. Jim looked at it. He began pacing around the garage. He had absolutely no idea what to do.

"Eric, we have to clean this mess up. We can't leave dead bodies in the garage."

"It's my mess, I'll clean it up."

"Eric, don't be ridiculous. Were you hurt at all?"

"No sir."

"Eric....why did you do this? You must know that killing people is wrong. It's very wrong."

"Well, so is stealing, poppa."

"Yes, but they aren't the same thing. I have a tracker on the car, we could have recovered it very quickly and had them arrested. Now, we have a huge mess on our hands."

"Poppa, these were bad men. No one is going to miss them," said Eric

"I'm sure that is true, but you just can't go around killing people, son. It's wrong. What happens if the cops show up here and start looking around. What are we going to do then?"

Eric just shrugged his shoulders.

"Okay, look. I have to get back to work. It will look suspicious if I'm gone any longer."

"Don't worry, poppa. I'll have it cleaned up by the time you get home."

Jim didn't know what to do at this point. His garage was now a crime scene and a horrific one at that. It suddenly occurred to him that his sweet innocent little Eric was not so sweet and innocent anymore. He had ripped apart two human beings without so much as an afterthought.

Christ almighty Jimbo.....what in the hell have you gotten yourself into?

He thought as he left the house. He made certain there was no blood on him. He still had the money. He stopped and went into a coffee house to try and wash the blood off the money. There

were nearly four thousand dollars in hundreds. He then had an idea. It was crazy, but then again, so was everything else in his life right now. He could place an order for the cash he had right now. Four thousand dollars worth of security blinds? Yeah, that would get the old man's attention real quick. It was tempting to pocket the money, really tempting, but having the owner in his pocket might be even better. He filled out a receipt and signed Jack Kellog's name on the bottom. He still had time to make it back to the office before he left for the evening.

As Jim was leaving the coffee house, it occurred to him that somehow in that entire melee, Eric remained completely unscathed. *He didn't even have a drop of blood on him!*

"Hey, you got a minute?" asked Jim as he poked his head in the owner's office.

"Sure, how'd it go?" asked the old man as he offered Eric a seat.

"Not sure. I gave him a free sample. He liked it. Gave me a wad of cash and told me to set one up in a few of his demo houses next week."

"He gave you cash?"

"Yeah, about four thousand dollars. Not much, but I didn't want to be pushy. No one likes an asshole."

"Jack Kellog gave you almost four thousand dollars? I mean that's great, it's just a little hard to believe. I've been trying for years just to get five minutes with him and I couldn't do it. What's your secret?"

"I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you," said Jim smiling.

The old man cracked a smile. Jim was in.

"You want a drink?"

"Please."

The old man poured them two glasses of scotch. They sipped for a moment in silence.

"We land this contract, it will put us on the map. Hell, even if half the homes use our shutters, we'll be rolling. You think you can handle all this?"

"I've done alright so far, haven't I?"

"That you have. Christ, I've tried every trick in the book. Here you are, a temp and you manage to do what I could not. Makes me second guess myself."

"Yeah, about that. Look, I don't want to seem greedy here. I can't stand greedy people, but I do believe in being paid for my work. If we sell a hundred thousand dollars worth of stuff to him, my commission is three thousand dollars. That's not very much. I was kind of hoping you and I could come to some kind of an arrangement here." said Jim as he finished his drink.

"What did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking twenty percent."

"Twenty percent? Didn't you just say you hate greedy people?"

"Hear me out: when word gets out that our products are installed in houses built by Jack Kellog, every rich asshole in America is going to want them. You won't be able to keep them in stock. I'm almost thinking of just giving them to Jack. See, you're still thinking in the thousands.....I'm thinking in the millions. This is our chance. We might not get another one like this."

"Jim, I must say.....I am very glad we decided to hire you." said the old man. "If I had a few more of you, I could retire by now."

Jim was elated, but he still had the horror show at home to deal with. He hated having to leave Eric, but he needed some time to make sense of what had happened in his garage. It looked like a scene from a battlefield in Vietnam. The thought of having to clean up human remains was not exactly his cup of tea. None of this made any sense. How did his little baby manage to slaughter two men? How did his dead son come back to life? How the hell was he going to pull this scam off? He had never even met Jack Kellog and the company was betting its future on him making this deal with Jack Kellog.

He opened the front door and stepped inside. He didn't even call for Eric. He opened the door to the garage and was stunned by what he saw. The garage was completely cleaned up. There was no trace of blood anywhere. Eric had cleaned the entire garage. He looked and looked. He spotted two huge garbage bags sitting in the middle of the floor. He knew what was inside. He turned and saw Eric standing in the doorway. Jim didn't know what to say.

"I cleaned it up poppa," he said sucking on a popsicle.

"Eric, how the hell did you do this? I've only been gone for a few hours."

"I cleaned fast. I wanted to have it ready when you came home. Can we play BATTLESHIP? Remember when you and I would play? You'd make popcorn and we would play. Wouldn't it be nice to do that again?"

"Sure son. If that's what you would like," said Jim.

"You can dump the trash bags in the woods. The wild animals can finish what is left of them," said Eric calmly.

"Okay. That's probably for the best. What's done is done."

"I'll get the board set up," said Eric.

Jim almost collapsed against the wall. He was in completely uncharted territory here.

Yes siree Jimbo, you've done it good this time. He thought to himself.

They played BATTLESHIP for two hours. Jim made dinner. Eric still would not eat. He didn't eat, drink or sleep. Maybe he did it when Jim wasn't around.or maybe since he wasn't technically alive, he didn't need to do any of those things.

Jim drank a beer and watched Eric flipped through the channels. How can a nine-year-old boy rip apart two human beings, clean up their remains and be perfectly content to watch reruns of KADOODLE? Jim realized that he had just asked for his son to come back to him. He had, only he was not the same. He was not like other nine-year-old boys, that much was for certain. Eric never wanted to talk about where he was for the last two years and three months. He was here, in front of him and that was where he belonged. Jim was half tempted to simply pack up what they could fit in the car and leave. Head someplace new. Someplace where Eric might have a chance at a normal life if that were at all possible.

"How is work going, poppa?"

"Alright, I guess. I might make some real money soon. That would certainly help out. Make some real money and leave to start over someplace. Wouldn't that be nice?"

"Oh yes. Someplace with snow. I would like to play in the snow."

"I just have to convince Jack Kellog to buy some of our products."

"Who is that?"

"He builds houses for rich people. If he buys our products and puts them in his new houses, our company would make a lot of money. I would make a lot of money."

"Sounds like this Jack guy could use some convincing," said Eric.

"That's my job. I have to convince him to buy our stuff."

Eric just nodded and went back to his cartoons. Jim dozed off on the couch. He woke up several hours later. His beer had slipped out of his hand and had spilled on the floor. He was only half awake when he went into the kitchen and saw some guy tied up in a chair. His face had been bloodied. Jim nearly had a heart attack. He saw Eric standing beside the man.

"Eric, what the hell is going on?"

"I brought him to you poppa. Now, he has to listen to you."

"Eric, what the.....how the hell did this man get here?"

"I told you poppa, I brought him to you."

"You brought who to me?"

"Jack Kellog. He wasn't too hard to find. He put up a fight at first. I hope I didn't hurt him too bad." said Eric.

Eric poured a glass of water into a cup and then threw it on Kellog's face.

Jack came too. He looked around the room.

"Where am I?" he asked

"Mr. Kellog.....my God, I am so sorry. I will get you out of here as quick as possible."

"How the hell did I get here?"

"My son brought you here. I hope you can forgive him, he's only nine."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Jack.....what I'm about to tell you stays between us and the almighty. I have your word on that, right?"

"What?" asked Kellog.

"Eric, my son. He died over two years ago. I brought him back using a voodoo ritual. He's still my son, but he has some unusual abilities, as you can see. It's not his fault. It's mine. It really is my fault. I just missed him so much. Have you ever lost a son, Jack?"

"Look, untie me right now. Do you want money? I've got a bunch of it. It's yours. Just untie me and get me out of here."

"Well, Jack. I'm afraid I can't do that. We have a bit of a situation here. Your patience and understanding would be greatly appreciated." said Jim trying not to mumble.

"Look, if you want money, I'll give you money. I know that's what you want, so just tell me how much you want and I'll make it happen.

Eric stood in front of Jack. His face went as white as a ghost.

"What the hell is he? Is he a monster or something?"

"Now Jack, let's not be rude here, that's my son."

"You said he died two years ago, so how can he be standing here in front of me?"

"Well, I brought him back to life. I know, I know, it's crazy. I just missed him so much. He was my son. Do you have sons?"

"That is no boy, that's for goddamn sure."

Eric grabbed his face. He nearly lifted Jack's chair off the ground. Jim was amazed at the strength of his son.

"Mr. Jack. My father sells stuff. Security blinds and shutters. He would like you to buy some and install them in your new houses. Will you help him?"

"What? What's he talking about?" asked Kellog.

"I work for a company that makes and sells security blinds and shutters. I was hoping you would buy some of them and install them in your new houses. The houses you are building by the river."

"That's why you brought me here? So I would buy your damn blinds? Are you serious?"

"Jack, I feel terrible about this. I really do. I wish my son hadn't done this to you, but here we are. So, the only question is, where do we go from here?"

Jack just looked at Jim and Eric. He was still trying to understand the scope of all of this.

"Sure, whatever you guys want. You untie me, let me go and I will buy whatever you want."

"You aren't going to go to the cops, right?"

"No, no of course not. You're a businessman. I can appreciate that."

"So then I have your word. No cops."

"Of course. Now, if you would be so kind as to untie me."

"Alright, Jack. I'm trusting you. Don't let me down here." said Jim as he undid the ropes holding him to the chair.

Jack stood up. He looked nervously at Eric.

"I'm sorry it had to be this way, Jack. You know how things are sometimes."

"Of course. No hard feelings?" said Jack.

"Well, here, let me walk you out. That's the least I can do."

When Jim had his back turned, Jack grabbed a large kitchen knife from the counter. He lunged at Eric who quickly moved out of the way. Jim tried to grab him, only to have Jack push him off. Eric lost his footing and caught himself on the edge of the kitchen table. Jack plunged the knife right into Eric's little hand that was on the kitchen table. Eric never made a sound. He gave Jack a very nasty look. He never made a sound as he pulled the knife out of his hand. Eric quickly plunged the knife into Jack's leg. Jack collapsed on the kitchen floor. He was screaming in pain.

Jim and Eric stood over him. They both looked at one another.

"You know Jack, you are just like every other rich asshole I've ever met. You always think you're smarter than the rest of us. Only this time, you aren't. You should have just walked out the door."

"Fuck you." Jack hissed at them.

Eric grabbed his head and quickly snapped Jack's neck, breaking it instantly. It happened so fast, Jim barely had time to react. Eric let go of his head and Jack's lifeless body collapsed on the floor. They both stood in silence for a moment, trying to decide what to do next.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Jim.

"Bury him with the others. I'll help you before they start to stink," said Eric.

They loaded the trash bags up into the back of Jim's SUV. They still had a problem with Jack. They lifted his body into the back of the trunk. They closed the hatch door. Jim opened the garage door and they headed out to the woods to bury the bodies.

They drove in mostly silence. After about twenty minutes, Jim started talking.

"Can they trace Jack's body back to us?"

"No poppa, I don't see how."

"Did anyone see you?"

"No, poppa. No one saw me. They won't be able to trace any of this back to us." said Eric as he looked out the window into the night.

"Jack Kellog is a very important person. There's bound to be people looking for him. I wish you hadn't done this."

"I'm sorry. No use crying over spilled milk now is there, poppa?"

"Eric, he was a human being for God's sake. Look, we have to make a new rule here: you have to stop killing people. I won't be able to cover up for you for much longer. The more people you kill, the more likely you are to be caught. Killing people is wrong, don't you understand that?"

"Well, I suppose so, but in a way, didn't you kill me?" asked Eric.

"What are you talking about?"

"That day at the beach. You were talking on your phone. You were discussing business. Maybe if you hadn't been talking on the phone and instead were watching me, I wouldn't have died." he said

"Well, like you said: there's no point in crying over spilled milk, now is there?"

"No, poppa, I guess you're right. No use in pouring salt over old wounds. It's just that some wounds never heal, they just kind of scab over."

"Do you blame me for your death, Eric? Is that why you are doing all these terrible things?"

"What terrible things? I'm a good boy poppa."

"I mean killing all these people. I'm going to be held responsible for their deaths. Not you. No one is going to believe a nine-year-old boy could do these things. Eric, it's important. I am still your father and I want you to listen to me: you have to stop killing people. It's wrong, don't you understand that?"

"Yes, poppa. I was only trying to help you."

"I know son.....I know. I let you down that day. I can understand why you're angry with me. I will never let you down again. We've been given a second chance. Most people never get that. We have to make the most of our time together. Eric, are you ready to tell poppa where you have been for the last two years and three months?"

"Poppa. What difference does it make? We're together again. That's all that matters."

"You're right. That's all that matters."

They drove deep into the Pennsylvania woods. Out to the Sproul State Forest. They hadn't even seen another car in almost half an hour. Jim got out and picked up Kellogg's dead body. He spent the next two hours digging a hole in the ground. He poured some gasoline over the bodies to try and hide the scent, then filled it back in with rocks and dirt. The sun was beginning to break through the clouds. It would be dawn soon. Jim was exhausted. He still had a two-hour drive back home. He stopped at a gas station and got some coffee. He asked Eric if he wanted anything. He just shook his head.

They had been awake all night and Eric wasn't even tired, let alone sleeping. Eric didn't sleep. He didn't do anything a normal nine-year-old boy should do. He fought hard to stay awake during that long, brutal drive home. He had to stop twice to stay awake. He pulled into the driveway and into the garage. Thank God he was off today. He and Eric sat down on the couch. Eric took off Jim's shoes. He placed them on the rug. He got Jim a blanket.

"Son, now you be a good boy while daddy is napping, okay? You can play video games if you like. You used to love to play video games."

"Get some sleep poppa. When you wake up, we can play catch," he said.

Jim was asleep a minute later. He had never needed sleep so much in his life.

In his dreams, they were a family again. His life was not a nightmare. He was still married to his college sweetheart. The only woman he ever loved. Eric didn't drown on that day. They were having a picnic. It was so serene. He never wanted the dream to end. He was happy again. He had almost forgotten what that felt like.

His eyes popped open. He looked at his watch. He had been asleep for almost five hours. He rubbed his eyes. He was still only half-awake when the doorbell rang. He ran over to the front door. He opened the door and nearly shit himself when he saw two men and a uniformed police officer standing in the doorway. Jim was suddenly wide awake.

"Can I help you?"

"Mr. Kilabrew, I'm Detective Watson....yes, that is my real name. This is Detective Marigold. Were you home this morning?" asked the detective.

"Yes, why?"

"Did you hear or see anything out of the ordinary? Anything next door at the Kemper residence?"

"No, I just woke up. What's going on?"

"Sometime this morning, someone entered the Kemper house and killed Laurie Kemper."

"What? You mean the little girl?"

"Yes. You say you were sleeping?"

"Yes, I had a late night. I've been asleep since eight or so. Jesus, what happened?"

"We're still trying to figure that out? Do you live alone?" asked Watson.

"Yes."

"You didn't hear or see anything out of the ordinary? Anyone who didn't seem to belong in the neighborhood?"

"No, I didn't. How old was she?"

"She would have been twelve next week. Look, if you can remember anything, please don't hesitate to call us. Keep your doors and windows locked at all times." he said and handed Jim his business card.

Jim followed the men outside. There had to be at least fifty people on the lawn of the Kemper House. Jim was only half-dressed. He recognized a neighbor and walked over to him.

"Jesus, what the hell happened?" asked Jim.

"It's horrible. Ripped the poor girl to pieces. The hell kind of an animal could do that? If I ever get my hands on them, there won't be any trial." said the old man angrily.

Jim stumbled back home. He closed the door. He had a sinking feeling he knew what kind of an animal could do something like this. He walked up the stairs to Eric's room. He opened the door and saw Eric playing with a giant tub of LEGOS.

"Eric. I am going to ask you a question. I need you to tell me the truth, okay?"

"Okay, poppa?"

"Did you kill that little girl next door?"

"Yes, poppa."

"Eric, why in the name of all that is pure and holy would you do something like that?"

"I had no choice poppa. I had to."

"What do you mean you had to. You always have a choice."

"I was going to make you some sandwiches and coffee. She was standing right in the window, looking at me. I went to school with her. She was in my class. She saw me. She would have told everybody and ruined everything. I had to kill her."

Jim just banged his head against the wall until it was bruised and bloodied.

"Are you out of your mind? Who in the hell would have believed her? You died! I'm pretty sure she even went to your funeral. Who would have listened to her?"

"That's just the problem poppa.....who would have listened to her?"

Jim was angry and disgusted at the same time. He had a monster living with him. A monster that looked and acted like his son, but this was not his son. This was something else entirely.

Whoever this little boy was, he wasn't even human.

Jim sat down next to his son.

"Eric.....you murdered an innocent person. Doesn't that bother you?"

"I don't like hurting all these people. I'm just doing this to protect us. To keep us together.....you want to be together, right?"

"Of course I do, but you have to stop killing people. Promise me, you will not kill anyone else from this point forward."

"Poppa, I can't do that. I will do my very best not to kill anyone else, that I will promise you. Now, why don't we play some checkers? You used to love playing checkers. I'll be red." he said as he pulled out the checkerboard and put the pieces on the board.

Jim sat down next to him and for the next twenty minutes, they were happy again. It was like his real son was back, not the horrible little monster sitting across from him. Like it or not, this was his son now.....maybe his son was always a cold-blooded psychopath, only he never lived long enough to act on his urges. Jim liked to think that wherever Eric had been for the last two years had made him into what he is. It was moments like these that made Jim tolerate his son's supremely evil behavior.

"Eric, we have a problem. You're right, we don't know who or what that girl told after having seen you. The cops might be back and want to search the house. We're going to have to put your games and toys away. We have to make it look like no one else is living in the house."

"Yes, poppa. That's a good idea. You're very smart. I'm sure you will find a way to get us out of this." said Eric as he jumped two of Jim's pieces.

"I hope so."

Jim and Eric sat on the couch. They had spent the last hour playing gin rummy. Eric won all the hands. He had become quite the little card player since his departure. Jim knew he had to put a stop to this before anyone else was killed. He just had no idea how to stop it. He had created this avalanche and he was standing helplessly at the bottom of the mountain about to be buried in it. Problem is, *he had brought a dead person back to life*. Once you cross that line, there just ain't no going back. He had violated some kind of primordial law of the universe. He had opened some kind of satanic can of worms, once the genie was out of the bottle, there was no putting him back in. He knew it would be pointless to talk to Luther, even if he could even find him. He'd probably just laugh at him and say "*shit cracker, hate to say I told you so.*" He never even really thought this would work, why would he? You can't bring a dead person back to life. Jim couldn't bear the thought of sending his little boy back to the netherworld. Maybe he could reform him, make him see the error of his ways. Killing the little girl was beyond stupid. The others he could excuse, but that one was just plain.....wrong. He had to assume she told somebody. At this point, that would be enough to have those dicks snooping around his house, probing and prodding until they found something to charge him with. He couldn't just up and leave, that would look even more suspicious. Neighbors were bound to be suspects, but so were her parents. Of course, no one would be looking for a dead person. He might get away with this after all. Any more dead bodies and Jim would be in the hot seat. Too many people were disappearing or being killed around here. Where there's smoke, there's usually fire.

He watched his son. His adorable, sweet little son plays with his toys. Hard to believe he was a mass murderer. His son was always making sure his poppa was comfortable. He had also learned how to cook and do the laundry. He missed his little buddy. Even though they had some difficulties to work through, he knew they would get through this. Nothing was going to get in their way now.

"Poppa, when are we going to see mommy?" he asked and put down the remote.

"Well, bud. Mommy had a very difficult time after you left. We all did. We don't know what her reaction will be when she sees you for the first time."

"Doesn't she want to see me?"

"Oh yes, of course, she does. It's just that she isn't doing very well, right now. See, she blamed me for your death. She thought it was my fault you drowned that day."

"I see."

"She was so sad, she.....well she tried to kill herself one night. If my meeting hadn't been canceled, she would probably have succeeded. She's in a hospital now, where she can get better."

"Does she ever call or write?"

"Well, she won't take any of my calls. She won't even see me. She served me divorce papers, but it's not final until she is out of the hospital. She can still change her mind."

"Why would she want to divorce you. You're the best poppa in the world!"

"I guess it was just easier to blame me than to accept that this was God's plan. Maybe I should be blamed. Maybe if that stupid lifeguard had been watching the water instead of trying to get into that girl's pants, he might have seen you. Maybe if I hadn't been so goddamn stupid and put my phone down for two seconds, you wouldn't have died. It was so hard after you left son. You'll never know how hard it was for me. Sometimes I would just sit in my bed and cry for hours until there were no more tears left. I put a loaded gun in my mouth one night and was almost ready to squeeze the trigger. But, you're here now, that's all that matters. You aren't going to leave me again, are you son?"

"Oh no, poppa. I'm here for good. I don't want to go back to that place. it's not like you think. There's no bright light or angels, or anything like that. it's much different. I think people are going to be very disappointed when they find out what happens after you die."

Jim realized at that point, he was probably one of, if not the only person in the history of the planet to know exactly what will happen to you when you die. He didn't care about that. He needed a plan. A good one. They had to get out of here and fast. Problem was, they just couldn't cut and run. They needed a reason. He knew just how to get one.

"You want to do what?" asked the old man

"The building and trades show in Columbus. Hell, every builder and his mistress is going to be there. We need exposure. Cold calling ain't going to cut it, not in this economy."

He could tell the old man was suspicious, but sales were in the toilet, so he didn't really have any choice.

"How long will you be gone?"

"I don't know, a week or so. The trade show is for three days. A day or two for travel, three days for the show, and a day or two to network."

"Network huh?"

"Look, we need a big boost here. You're not going to get it with these bums you've got manning the phones."

"They're not that bad."

"They couldn't even give this stuff away, let alone sell it. Look, if I'm going to keep running into brick walls here, then maybe this just isn't the place for me. I'd have that Kellogg account if he hadn't just disappeared this weekend."

"Yeah, I heard that. His wife was waiting for him in the kitchen. Just upped and vanished. Kind of odd."

"I'm sure he'll turn up. So, how bout it? Are we a go?"

"I expect some tangible results from this. I trust you won't let me down?"

"I'm sure you'll be pleasantly surprised."

Jim left work early that day. He had a lot of miles ahead of him. When he didn't return after a week, they would get suspicious. His boss reminded him again to put the four thousand dollars in the safe and sign for it before leaving. Naturally, Jim never did. When he didn't return, they would just assume he stole the money. Of course, there was really no way to prove it one way or another. That's exactly what he wanted: *let them look for a thief, not a mass murderer*. Everyone at work would assume he pocketed the money and that's why he vanished. Four grand isn't a lot, but it's more than most will ever see in their lives. With Kellog out of the picture, the money was untraceable. He now had his excuse. The old man had given him a thousand dollars for motels and expenses. Jim felt bad about ripping them off, but there was no other way. This might be his only opportunity. He had to take it. He raced home to tell Eric the good news.

I'm going to open this door and there won't be any dead bodies inside, right Eric? he thought to himself as he opened the front door.

He let himself in. The silence was unnerving.

"Eric?" he shouted.

"Yes, poppa," he said from behind him.

"You didn't kill anybody while I was at work, did you?"

"No poppa, I was a good boy."

"Good. We gotta move fast. My idiot boss gave me a thousand dollars. We now have almost five thousand dollars to start our new life. Did you pack everything?"

"Yes, poppa, right here," he said and held up his little briefcase.

"Okay, did you pack the food?"

"Yes."

"Did you pack clean underwear?"

"Yes. Four pairs. Why do they call them pairs, when there is only one?"

"I don't know son. Creative marketing I guess. Okay, the Jeep's fueled up. Are you ready to begin your life?"

"Oh, yes Poppa! We are going to be so happy in our new place? Can I bring some of my toys?"

"Just a few. We have a lot of packing to do." said Jim.

The two of them worked frantically for the next two hours. When the Jeep was full, they stopped and took a break.

"Poppa, would you like some cheese and crackers? I know they are your favorite."

"Put some in a sack. We'll eat them on the road."

They were on the road fifteen minutes later. Jim figured they would hide out in Ohio. He already had the perfect place. He had scoured the local newspapers and found a trailer for rent right across the Ohio River. He figured when he waved enough money around, the owner was bound to bite. It was on a secluded farm, ten miles from town. If anyone asked, he was working on the farm.....not that he knew a damn thing about farming.

They had just crossed into West Virginia, just past Wheeling, when they saw her standing on the side of the road. Eric spun around and looked at her.

"Poppa, shouldn't we offer her a ride?"

"You really think that's a good idea? The last thing we need is for someone to be able to identify us."

"It's raining outside. She'll catch a cold if she stays out there much longer."

"I think this is a bad idea kiddo," he said and spun the Jeep around.

He pulled up next to the girl.

"Hi.....want a lift?"

"Sure....I'm freezing. Thank you so much. You guys are the best."

Her name was Raquel. She was twenty-something. Boyfriend cheated on her...or she cheated on him, or something. Jim knew she was a junkie. Too bad, if she cleaned herself up, she could be a real pretty lady. Right now she looked like ten pounds of shit in a five-pound bag. Jim pulled into the truck stop. They needed gas. Jim offered her something. The thought of leaving the two of them alone was.....*terrifying*. He just didn't trust Eric not to kill her. Still, he had to leave him on his own at some point. He couldn't stand over him for the rest of his life. At some point, the kid was going to have to be able to stand on his own two feet.

"I'll be right back. Eric.....you be a good boy for poppa. Remember what we talked about.

"Yes, poppa."

"You are such a cute little boy. We'll be fine, I love kids."

Jesus girl, you got no idea.

Jim was gone no more than five minutes. Five minutes.....that was all it took. He opened the car door. He bought a soda for Raquel and a coffee for himself. He saw her slumped over the seat. Eric just had this blank look on his face.

"What happened?" he asked as he got inside the car and closed the door. He looked around. He hoped no one was looking.

"I don't know poppa."

"Eric, did you kill her?"

"Poppa, please, don't be angry. I can't help myself."

Jim started his Jeep and left the truck stop. They pulled off the highway onto a deserted road. He pulled her out and threw her body in the bushes. He looked at Eric. Jim was none too happy. Eric looked at him and smiled. That innocent smile. As angry as Jim was, he knew that smile would win him over. He wanted to choke the life out of him and hug him all at the same time. This was their life now. Eric was his adorable little monster. His psychopath who wore underoos. He got back in the car and turned to face his son.

"This is how it's going to be from now on, huh? Just you and me and whatever poor bastard happens to cross paths with you?"

"Poppa.....when you brought me back....there were no guarantees. You really thought you could make a little deal with the devil?"

"I guess I didn't read the fine print, son. My bad."

"Why don't we find someplace to stop for the night. We can play gin rummy. I brought some milk and cookies. We can have so much fun. It will be just like before I....."

"That's just the problem son. Nothing will ever be like it was before.....not ever."

They played gin rummy and laughed and hugged. Jim hadn't been this happy in years. His little boy was finally back in his arms, where he belonged. Of course, this deal came with a little hitch, one that he hadn't for seen. How could he? As Jim watched him sitting in the bed, playing with some of his trucks and toys, he had to restrain himself from crying. At that moment, he felt like the luckiest man in the world. His little boy had finally come back home.