



Antevellum

“Ah well you fooking mother do you remember how it used to be you could walk into a pub in America and not be surrounded by the wraiths of thin-bodied long-haired Scotsmen drinking Guinness and holding forth on the waste of the world and the wonders of the geniuses of literature gnawing away at the underpinnings of the Western world who do their best to get it all to totter into the sea but that’s all before the Tome was found and the litterateurs died by the score and Manhattan was paralyzed by a strike against the cold inhumanity of the endlessly rising tin soldiers of the international currency market and even so distant a place as Australia could hear the trembling of American cities at the edge of the sea, they could hear it over the popping bubbles in the heads of their beers, they could hear how time had made a turn for the worse or for the better no one could tell for sure but it had turned and it was all that Tome’s doing, in that awful April in that dread year that it came out and fell open, and maybe that all happened before the Feds knew the Land of Nod even existed for it was three months before they

started the investigation and a paltry three million dollars they put into it, no more than they put into inquiring into the falling of the towers, so little a sum the conspiracy pundits knew the Feds were hiding something: if they held off investigating the Tome for three months and only let out three million to investigate it, it was because things were going to hell, the president’s rating in New Hampshire was down to thirty-three percent and the war had gotten to the point that there were more soldiers dying than there were kids being born in Bird, Kansas, always the first sign that an American war is doomed, and the next in line in the Bush League knew extreme measures had to be taken. And don’t you know they had to have had a part in it, somehow knowing they had to rip open the fabric of reality and show the chump liberals they were playing with the wrong fire and so the Feds helped set this book down, the Tome, or at least looked the other way when it was plumped down and stocked in grocery stores and left in laundromats and seeded in Salvation Armies across the continent and then the same Feds acted alarmed and shouted about some leftist counter-cultural madness that was assaulting the peaceability and reasonability of the competently-led American public and shouldn’t something be

done about it, and then do something they did, after three months with a couple pennies in their pockets they took arms and dropped a couple missiles on the Land of Nod and then shook down Congress until a third term was enacted as an emergency measure, the only way to keep intact the one thread of reality that everyone could hold in common while their grandmas and nannies and priests and grocers turned into raving maniacs, that one slim thread everyone could agree on, the one central stupidity that brought everyone together: everyone could point in one direction at what was wrong in the world, so they had to keep the fool in office just so there would be one thing, just one thing people could agree on, an anchor in a sea-shifting reality, one still point in a maelstrom world. The fucking bastards the Feds had a part in it and the Tome that should have ushered in a new age has become the source of the prolonged crucifixion of the world.”

Tommy stabbed his stirrer into his beer and twirled. He had always been crazy to stir his beer and it had gotten worse the way so many things had gotten worse.

“The ghosts,” said Marcella down the bar. “The ghosts. The ghosts.”

That was all she ever said. “The ghosts.” All of us sitting there in the Cauldron, our favorite tavern, knew whom she meant even if we tried not to speak of them ourselves out of not knowing whether they were holy creatures or if they were some kind of afterimages erupting like promotional spittle from the mouth of the publisher that had released the Tome and that now, it was said, was at the heart of the reality-storms that caused the Great Broadway Flood and the rains of molasses in Central Park. The ghosts were everywhere and in some places children dressed carefully in oversized shirts and imitated them, wanting to be ghosts themselves, and in other places madmen shot at them, trying to hold things together by sinking more deeply into the

reactionary and privileged violence that was itself the cause, according to the Tome, of the undermining of reality that was taking place. Go ahead and shoot at ghosts, you idiots. Well, they had always shot at ghosts. The clock above the bar said it was almost midnight. I would have stood up to leave but knew what might happen. I had been here the last two Fridays with Tommy and Marcella when the girl-bride Percy showed up. I called her the girl-bride because she had such a young face and she showed up with a white veil and white dress that looked like it had gone through scorching hell, like she was some dark-eyed and olive-skinned baker whose flowing gown kept getting licked by the fires of the infernal ovens. She wandered into the bar and glanced around, and then on both nights she fastened on Marcella and lipped at the air as though she was speaking but as though there was a door that had closed over the sound she was making, shutting it all off; and we could tell sometimes she was talking about the Tome because her lips would make the right shapes and one time she pointed at a copy of it sitting on the bar near one of those thin-boned long-haired wraiths with his pint of Guinness; and she would be mouthing at Marcella and Marcella would be watching Percy and ignoring us and her beer; and then after the big man in the T-shirt with steam rising off his sweating shoulders came and took Percy away Marcella would speak normally again for a few minutes and would tell us that the girl was named Percy and that Percy wanted her to do something because Percy missed her mother, but Percy’s husband always dragged her away before she could finish telling Marcella what she wanted to say.

Tonight it happened so quickly I wondered if someone had taken a slice out of reality, probably chipping out five minutes of my life and replacing it with a bent-over wraith in the corner sucking noisily at beer-

froth, because it seemed one moment Percy was there in her burnt white dress chewing at the air in front of a rapt Marcella, who right then looked beautiful with her disarrayed black hair and her soft eyes and her lips that were moving almost in time with Percy's, so beautiful that in thinking back I shake so much I spill coffee across my page, smearing the ink, and the paper for a moment has the color of an autumn evening of blowing leaves and smoke-heavy air and cawing crows; one moment Percy is there, and the next the Cook, we call him that, is there with his hammy paw on Percy's shoulder and Percy has first the rictus of shock and then an adoring look of love for her captor-husband in his dirty T-shirt; and then they have disappeared and Tommy has gone to the bathroom and Marcella is standing near me and my hand on my beer shakes as I swivel around on the stool to talk to her.

"Will you ride with me tonight," she said. "Percy said it's tonight there will be the bridge and we have to go to the Land of Nod."

There is no such place which is what I told her. The Tome came from the Land of Nod but that was a reality that never quite existed in the first place and one that was cut off completely by the Feds once they got involved. That is how I see it anyway.

Marcella would say no more. Tommy said when he got back from the john that hell, no, he was going to have another beer and he was no way in hell going bicycling in the rain, so that when we were pedaling down toward the docks there were only the two of us, Marcella to my left seeming to glide along the street beneath the dingy-glassed street lights while I was struggling with my pedals, my chain, my tires, everything—as though the fog creeping across the tarmac was lifting up white fingers to tangle in my spokes.

We rode to the end of the docks and although I had wanted to believe Marcella in the one moment when she said something besides, "The ghosts, the ghosts," I had not

believed her, for I was thinking we would pedal up to the end of the docks and not find the sea wall stretching out into the sea and not find the path atop it, above the reach of the waves. The wind was higher here now that we were away from the buildings and I looked forward to finding nothing there at the end of the docks although what was waiting for me there was disappointment, for after a time I realized we had left the wood planking of the last dock behind us and now were riding on damp concrete, Marcella's bike still floating along with the whirring of rubber tires mixing with the sounds of the waves and her low voice saying, "The ghosts, the ghosts," a murmur I strained to catch in my ears even as I strained at my pedals, trying to keep up and thanking Innana and all the other goddesses and gods, above and below, that I had thought to drink so much beer before embarking on this crazy mission. Whatever mission it was I had the strength for it. The mist turned to rain and pelted around us; the waves broke against the wall; the wind threatened to push us over. I wanted to scream out that we were doomed, that the wall would crumble under us, that immense goldfish would fly out of the black water to seize us by our thighs, that the storm-riding gulls would pluck our eyes out, but I had no breath left for screaming, on top of which the waves quieted down and the wind died and the path broadened, even though the rain kept on pelting, and I knew we had reached the Land of Nod.

Marcella stopped and parked in front of the squat building that looked like a gray rock having two square candle-lit eyes. When we walked inside enough light came out that I could read the name on the door: Parchment Pub, a name I knew well from the Tome, the pub where one of the characters, Ben Wanderman, had spent his last two-pound coin on a pint that he drank up. Still thirsty, he had started looking at the rows of old books lining the walls of the Parchment, killing time

while hoping someone would walk in with a generous heart and a full purse who would buy him a round: but it was a gloomy and rain-swept night when no one was abroad and Wanderman ended up going up and down the book-lined walls while Patsy, the raven-haired bartender, shook her head and said, "Oh, you're in a bad way, Ben Wanderman, but who knows but some kind soul will walk in," and Wanderman, growing thirstier by the moment, pulled down a book that called to him from a high shelf and it was the book that had not been opened in a thousand years, the Tome itself: and from that moment reality was changed forever, first in the Land of Nod, and then in the whole world.

We stepped in as Patsy with the raven hair and deeply set, haunted eyes said, "Oh, you're in a bad way, Ben Wanderman, but who knows but some kind soul will walk in," and I knew in a flash that Percy had somehow guided us here. Percy had set Marcella on a road leading into the past, into exactly the right past, the one where there was a Land of Nod at the end of the long sea wall: and we were the kind-hearted strangers who would walk in and who would buy the poor soul another pint and keep him from wandering down the book-lined walls of the Parchment and keep him from reaching for the Tome. As beautiful as it was the Tome and all the shifts of reality it provoked had brought ruin upon our world, for the mind-forsaken League was still in power in our country and now was bombing half the nations of the world, and was so worried about New Hampshire it was thinking of bombing itself. Oh did we yearn for what they call those Antevellum times.

Marcella sat at the bar and showed me what Percy had given her, back at the Cauldron: a handful of two-pound coins. To Patsy she said she would buy a round: and there at the bar was a man sitting looking dejected at his empty pint glass whose face lit and became genial and friendly and animated. We found

ourselves talking with him of books and beer and geniuses and smart-asses and boors and idiots, and we were having a good time, a better time than we ever had in the company of any of the gaunt long-haired specters that haunted our country's taverns and that looked just like this Ben Wanderman; and Ben Wanderman's eyes glowed dark as beer while he talked with us, and they had a brilliance that was bright like the sweat-beading sides of a pint; and then we saw his glass was empty, and then empty again, and then yet again, and Patsy would not take my dollars when Marcella ran short of coins.

"And I hate to do it," said Patsy, fixing us with her deeply set, haunted eyes, "but we have our rules here and if you're out of money you'll have to not loiter so I thank you for your business and hope you'll come again and good-bye."

"But Ben here—"

"Oh, Ben's an old friend and you don't shoo out an old friend when he's down on his luck."

Ben had that lost look, gazing upon his glass.

The walls were lined with books.

Outside, Marcella touched my sleeve and looked near tears and said, "We failed, we failed," and since she stood so near my arms went around her and since she was speaking so close to my face I let her stop my lips from answering back. My heart beat fast and I felt the rain warm in my hair and I thought to hell with the messed-over world, let reality change however it wanted because I was here and Marcella was here, and the touch of her lips was like balm upon a wound I had not realized was there. I squeezed her tightly and said if we pedaled hard we could make it back for a last one with Tommy. I had dollars, after all, and it was a beautiful rainy night. We flew between the rushing waves down the sea-wall, calling out to each other against the wind and the pelting rain. The ghosts, the ghosts! Well, yes, the ghosts. To hell with them.