

DELINEATION

Wayne Goodchild



Fluctuations of a neon red like angry flame, interlaced with black flickers. Muted light strobes against my closed eyelids, trying to convince me to open them. The world is changing around me, but all I focus on is rhythm. Rhythm. Walking. The crunch of dirt turns wet, the desert air takes on a salt bite and fresh smell. Heat dissipates. Time passes. I've arrived.

I open my eyes to find myself on the shore of a small beach. It forms a crescent around a bay, and there's a village or small town before me. Fishing boats bob in the water nearby, and a few people mill about. Some are stood staring at me with unbridled fear. I smile and wave, and they run away. They bump into a woman as she

walks towards me, and I can't believe my eyes. She stops a short way in front of me, drops a black holdall on the ground, then crosses her arms.

“Smooth move lighting out on me without even a goodbye, Else,” says Veronica. She's dressed in a flattering red and white checkered shirt and tight blue jeans. Her midnight blue hair is in a loose ponytail; she pushes stray strands away from her face as she waits for my response.

“What?” Which time did I do this to her? There are too many variables to recall. Every time is the first time.

Her pose relaxes and I sense relief in her voice as she steps closer. “I wondered when you'd come back. I was starting to get a bit freaked out here. You won't *believe* what I've seen at night.”

I ask, “What are you doing here?”

She replies, with an amused smirk, “You told me about this place, back in Suicide, said you had reason to believe she'd passed through here at some point. Amazing that crossing the threshold can bring a person to a place when you don't know its name. Thought I'd get a headstart.”

How many times have I crossed the threshold now? I can't remember telling Veronica anything about *her*, about her own travels. Had I mentioned this place after the first time I crossed the threshold and had to return to Suicide? Certain things about Suicide remain constant in my memory: meeting Veronica, the White Line cultists, killing The Liberator. Interstitial details change, but those

Wayne Goodchild

core moments persist. What new series of events have brought me not only backwards, but allowed Veronica to go on ahead, even further back than me? Was it a cruel cosmic joke? Was the threshold, such as it is, actually a new god? How much control over my actions do I, does anyone, have?

“Earth to Else.” Veronica snaps her fingers in front of me. “I asked around and found out about your wife. She left here yesterday.”

“What?”

Veronica gives an exaggerated groan. “Your *wife*. She was in the local bar with some old guy. Left with him. He had a van covered in symbols. The people here seem scared *and* impressed by him; it's weird.”

“So did I leave you here or did you come on your own?”

She giggles and playfully slaps my arm. “Both, silly.” I get the sense of things unraveling and pulling together all at once. “Anyway,” she continues, hooking an arm through mine and leading me away from the water, but not before slinging the holdall over her left shoulder. “I figured I'd save you some time and did my good cop/bad cop impersonation. Turns out the old guy's name is Richards—didn't get a first name—and apparently he calls by here quite often. The landlady in this bar I found said he usually heads south from here. She's a miserable bitch, by the way.”

I stop and pull Veronica around a little roughly. I force myself to look at her for as long as possible, her strange beauty trying to make

me avert my eyes. “Why are you helping me?”

“Else, calm down.” She gently pries my hands from her shoulders. “Y'all know why. I told you, back in Suicide, remember?”

I rub my face and lick my salty lips. I need food, water and a damn good night's sleep. “You were waiting for me. Except you didn't know it was me until we met.”

“Yeah, and also watching you in action with The Deathless Voice was pretty fucking special.” She winks. “How could I *not* follow you after realizing you're....you know...*him*.”

“Not this again.”

“I *know* you don't think you're the i-word.” She gives a familiar coquettish grin. “C'mon, Else. The yokels are starting to give us funny looks. I mean, *funnier* looks. We should get a move on.”

“Where?”

“Christ Almighty, Else. After your wife!” She frowns at me, barely diluting her beauty. “Are you okay?”

“I will be.” Will I? “I don't feel like myself right now.”

“Well, don't worry. I've acquired transport and food. *And* fresh clothes.”

I can't help but look surprised.

“There are a few vehicles in this charming, freaky place and I found a car with almost a full tank of gas.”

“And the food?”

She pats the holdall. “Mostly bread and cheese. Some jerky, but

Wayne Goodchild

I suspect its horse. Few bottles of water.”

“Get some vol-au-vents and we can throw a dinner party.”

Veronica treats me to her joyous laugh, says “Bless your heart!” then pulls me away from the beach.

“Did you steal them?” The locals clearly aren't the giving type.

“People tend to give me things, Else.”

Well that told me.

She leads me along old streets that might once have been classed as 'quaint' and attracted tourists, but now lay in various states of disrepair, flanked occasionally by dilapidated buildings. As soon as we're in an alley away from prying eyes, she stops me and gets me to change my clothes.

“You'll attract all the wrong kinds of attention walking about looking like you were in an abattoir explosion.”

“I don't look *that* bad, Veronica.”

She arches an eyebrow.

“Alright, so maybe I do.” I start unbuttoning my ragged, bloodstained shirt. “There are more subtle ways to perv on me, sweetheart.”

Veronica gives a cheeky grin and turns around.

Soon enough, I'm wearing fresh pants, socks and a shirt. “Couldn't convince someone to give you their underwear?” I ask, pulling my crimson-stained shoes back on.

She sticks her tongue out and leads the way onward.

THREE

Old Betty wasn't the only thing that'd seen better days; the tarmac beneath her wheels lay pitted and cracked as it led away from the fishing town and into the night-drenched countryside. They'd left the rain and mist behind, at least for now. Sam braced an arm against the passenger window and ceiling as the van rocked and bumped along at a steady speed. "I thought you said it'd be bumpy if I stayed in the back?"

"Believe me, compared to the jolts you'd get back there this here's Business Class."

She grimaced in response and reached for the radio. Any noise would be welcome around now. Unfortunately, the radio was another casualty of Betty's past: something had been smashed into it so it was completely unusable. She returned her attention to the

Wayne Goodchild

world outside. The orange moon occasionally hid behind steel-grey clouds, its light diffused across barren hills and ruins as a jaundice outline. “Looks like this part of the country got the worst of it.”

“Perhaps.”

Sam turned to him. “Perhaps what?”

Richards kept his eyes on the road as he replied, “Perhaps this part of the country got the worst of it.”

“I was just thinking that.” She let the idea hang in the air between them for a moment before continuing. “Sometimes I wonder if what happened was so monumental it can't have been caused by just one thing.”

“And other times?”

“Maybe that's what the gods want us to think. If we're so busy looking for a million different causes, and therefore ways to fix them, we'll miss the one core...” she searched for the right word, “cause,” she finished limply. “That doesn't feel like the right way to describe it though. *Cause.*”

“What else should we call it, assuming there was a single thing?”

She shrugged. Then: “Holy crap, is that a hitchhiker?”

A person stood on her side of the road. As they neared him or her, the van's headlights revealed ragged clothes and the suggestion of emaciation. But more disturbing was its face: it watched them pass with burning azure eyes that left vapour trails as it turned its head. Sam shivered as Richards noted: “A remnant.”

“Of?”

He shrugged, indicating either *Who knows?* or more than likely, *Who cares?*

Sam shifted in her seat and turned to face Richards. “Earlier, you mentioned demons.”

“Yes. Demons.” Richards narrowed his eyes. His bearded face looked malevolent in the red glow from the dashboard. “But not just out there. In here, too.” He tapped his chest. Not entirely sure how to react, Sam simply stared at the priest. Undeterred, Richards continued: “We all have demons inside us, Miss Mason. I’d say yours is...Grief.”

She felt herself bristle. “Is this the part where you give me a taste of your act, Richards?”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite follow.”

“Back in the day, psychics were ten-a-penny. I saw a few who claimed they could contact dead relatives. But it was all bollocks.”

“You think I’m some kind of charlatan?”

Sam sensed a hint of bemusement in Richards’ tone. Was he trying to goad her? “They all pulled a variation of the same con. ‘Is there a Mary...Martha...Mary! There is a Mary here? Mary, you lost a loved one, yes? Recently? A little while ago...Oh, five months ago. And it was your mother...mother-in-law? Yes, you two were always close, weren’t you? No, not to start with, but at the end.’ And on and on like that. They call it ‘fishing’. Vague suggestions based on the victim’s age, as to who they might want to speak with, and the

Wayne Goodchild

audience member effectively fills in the blanks themselves. They almost always ended with a sentiment like 'They just want you to be happy'. Something that carried as much emotional weight as a bag of air.”

Richards brooded on this for a few beats. “Your soul's wounded, Miss Mason, I can see that, and the cut runs deep. No need to look at me like that. I'm just telling you what's obvious to me. It started as Grief but it's festered, become something much more...*potent*.”

“Very...perceptive,” Sam said, trying not to sound sarcastic but failing miserably.

“In the interests of transparency, and seeing as we're travelling companions, I believe it's fair to admit my own demon is Arrogance.”

The way he said it, like how he'd said *Grief*—making it sound like an actual *thing*—made Sam pay attention. She regarded him coolly. “Arrogance?”

“Yes. I face a daily battle to prevent it from blossoming into Hubris. Would you like me to elaborate?”

“Depends. How far do you intend to drive?”

“Not too much farther.”

Sam stretched as best she could. “Then feel free to regale me all you like, reverend. After all, you've got a captive audience.” She threw him a sidelong glance, but he ignored it and her remark.

“You spoke of a *cause*, Miss Mason. Well, I have a theory. The demons—monsters—gods—whatever you want to label them,

derive their power from *belief*. The more people believe in them, the more powerful they—the monsters—become. Therefore, *however* these new gods appeared, people had no choice but to believe in them—”

“Or go mad.”

“Or go mad,” Richards conceded. “This made them incredibly powerful, or certainly added to it. I don't think it'd be possible to stop people believing in them *completely*, so my plan is to bolster belief in another force. I theorise that if I can generate enough belief, then that force will be able to take on and defeat the so-called 'new gods'.”

Sam stared at Richards for a few beats then blinked. “Wow.”

Richards eased his body back against his seat and flexed his fingers on the steering wheel. “See? Arrogance.”

A few moments of contemplative silence passed between them, before Sam reached into her satchel and pulled out the two-inch thick notebook. “I hope you don't mind if I write that down.”

The elderly priest shifted. “Hmm. I wondered what you'd wrote earlier.”

“Just notes.” Sam gave a wry smile and held the bulging journal up. The red dashboard glow added a sinister sheen to the mottled brown cover. “If I see or hear anything interesting on my travels, it goes in here. It's kind of like a...a travelogue.”

“From the state of that, I'd say you've seen and heard a lot, young lady.”

Wayne Goodchild

“Ha. Yeah. You could say that.”

“I dare say I'd rather enjoy reading it.”

Sam pulled the notebook to her chest, hesitant. “Sorry, Richards...no one else has ever read it. It's sort of personal.”

His lips formed a tight, thin line in response. Sam thought he might be trying to end the conversation until he asked, “And what about the liquor?”

“What about it?” She slipped the journal back into her bag.

“Smelled like whiskey. You don't look the sort to imbibe on a regular basis...”

“You can actually say 'alcoholic', but no, I'm not one, and no, that's not denial. It's what's left of my dad's favourite bourbon.” Realising she'd divulged more than she intended, Sam shut up and focused her attention back out her window. Stunted trees lined the road, dark houses flickering between the trunks as they sped past.

“What's waiting for you in the next town, Richards?” She cocked her thumb out the window.

The priest glared at the trees and background houses. “That's nowhere I want to be.” Turning the question back onto Sam, he rephrased it as, “What led you to Hampton, Miss Mason?”

Crafty, she thought. “Okay then. I've got no reason hiding that from you. Answers. I wanted answers.”

“To?”

She considered this for a moment. “You know what, Richards? You might actually have the answers for me.”

He couldn't keep the humour from his voice as he replied "Oh, really?"

"Yeah. You said you're from this area, right? Well, I've ended up here because I'm looking for a place." She chuckled. "Wouldn't it be bloody brilliant if the town we're off to is where I need to be?"

"It'd be most serendipitous," Richards mused. "Where are you looking for?"

"Devil's Reef."

A look shifted across the old man's face like a midday shadow. Sam couldn't quite place it. Unease? Suspicion?

"You know where it is?"

"Not exactly...just made me wonder, is all. You're not the first person who's asked me about it."

Sam bolted upright. "What? Who?"

Richards waved a dismissive hand and grimaced as Old Betty bounced over another pothole. "Trouble. Nobody important."

"Which is it?"

"They're likely dead by now, so it doesn't matter."

The priest was clearly flustered, which just made Sam more intent on pressing the matter. "But someone else out there is looking for it?"

"*Was*. I told you, they're dead." He let his annoyance bubble over as he rumbled, "Why do you want to go there, anyway?"

"Personal reasons. Do you know where it is?" she demanded.

Richards' wide shoulders shook as his annoyance trembled

Wayne Goodchild

through his broad frame. Finally, he unleashed an exaggerated sigh. “All I know is what I heard from stories. *Stories*, young lady. To be taken with a pinch of salt.”

She held her hand up and mimed drizzling salt over food. “There it is, so give it to me, rev.”

Richards grunted a laugh and shook his head. “Apparently, there used to be a 'Devil's Reef' south of here, but it got dynamited years ago. Caused too many shipwrecks, or somesuch.”

“That'd explain why it's not on any maps.”

“And that's it.”

Something screeched in the night sky. The sense of a pressure lifting, then the return of the steady, monotonous rumble of the van's tyres on the road. “Can you take me there?”

“There's nothing to take you to, young lady. Whether the stories are true or not. There isn't even a town near it.”

That sounded wrong, but she couldn't put her finger on why. “But can you take me there?” Richards seemed hesitant, so Sam offered: “I'll do you a favour in return. It's great you want to do good deeds for the sake of it, but altruism can be taken advantage of and I'm not that sort of person. Take me to Devil's Reef—or where it was supposed to be, at least—and I'll help you out, somehow.”

“You *could* let me read your book.” His answer came too quick, too eager. He must have realised, as he added, “Or help me with my work.”

“Your...work?”

“Yes. I'm taking the Word of God to those who need it most.”

Sam shook her head. “You're mental.” When Richards glared at her, she apologised. “Thinking out loud again, sorry.”

“Regardless. I'll be reminding the people in the next town that the true God still exists, and you can help me. In fact, I have a few places to visit as I head south so if you stick with me I'll get you where you want to be.” He gave her a winning smile. “Yes, the townsfolk ahead need deliverance and I intend to grant them it. You'll get a front row seat to the wondrous power of the Word.”

“Yeah, well, you are a priest, so I wouldn't expect any less.”

Taking this as a cue, Richards lapsed into silence. Sam considered his offer and realised it made sense. It'd certainly save her legs a lot of trouble, at least. She turned from staring out at the night and asked, “So what's waiting for you in the next town?”

“Some very unfortunate souls who, like the people of Hampton, have fallen under the spell of diabolical forces.”

“Right. Obviously. And are you going to try and stop *them* eating a new god?”

“There is no need for flippancy, young lady. I do important, serious work that nobody else has the decency to attempt. In this next instance, I'll be healing people.”

She tried not to laugh in disbelief.

Richards made a show of checking his mirrors, even though they were, and had been, the only vehicle out here since they set off. “We would easily reach the town tonight, but I think it'll be prudent to

Wayne Goodchild

park up and rest beforehand. Besides, my meeting's not scheduled until the morning.”

“Oh, it's *scheduled*. I didn't know you had a secretary.”

“I find your brusqueness refreshing and engaging, Miss Mason, even if your manners are sorely lacking.”

“Sorry, but with the way things are these days, I can't see a legitimate priest getting invited to town fairs and bingo nights.” Old Betty rattled over a patch of loose gravel, the small stones *tinking* off the undercarriage. Sam squinted and noticed the woods on the driver's side were bordered by a gravel hard shoulder. She couldn't be sure, but it looked like there were deep tyre ruts along parts of it.

Richards said, “We'll pull over in a moment. The woods round here have rough tracks through them, for forest maintenance.”

“Is that a good idea?”

“Forgive me if I'm repeating myself, but this van's the safest place for miles.” He affectionately patted the dashboard. “Old Betty is warded against a great many demons.”