

A Crack in the Pavement

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Bicycling home three days before his wife died, Gil Ridley swerved around a deer carcass lying in the middle of the road. He thought to race home for a hacksaw and buck knife to butcher it while it was fresh, before someone else got to it. These were hungry times. But, coming to a foot-dragging stop beside it, Gil realized the cadaver was two-legged, naked and lying on its side in a fetal position so he could not determine the sex, no doubt run down by some big rig that had abandoned rutted interstates and taken to back roads. Sonnabitch had likely climbed down from his tractor, prodded the victim with a toe and muttered, "Poor bastard is dead." Just left it there. In his own driving days, Gil would have rolled the body up in a blanket and wrestled it up into the sleeper. Then, the damndest thing! The corpse disappeared, sucked down into a crack in the pavement. Gone.

Gil dismounted the bike—no easy task with his arthritic knees and hip joints—kneeled stiffly down on the shoulder and sniffed the pavement. Sat up straight. "I seen mirages but, damnitall, I never seen that before." It had been there sure enough—what they called

an “apparition,” a forewarning of death maybe. Because, truth to tell, what he’d seen in that first instant was his own wife, Amanda Ridley, stretched out bare naked on the pavement (fine body for a seventy-four-year-old woman—used to be, before cancer stripped flesh from her bones), and before his eyes she’d coiled up in a fetal position. “Can’t blame you none, babe, exposed in a public place in your condition! No, sir.” Doctors gave up on her five years ago when they closed the hospital in Haneyville after her last chemo, and she’d been living on borrowed time ever since. “Remission,” they called it.

Walky-Talky, passing silently on the far side of the road, glanced up at him; they exchanged a nod. Didn’t bother old Walky to find Gil muttering to himself. After all, he himself walked the roads loudly reporting the news and weather from the transceiver they say Tommy Whitehead installed in his brain. But here lately Walky had stopped reporting; maybe his receiver was broke down or it had got too depressing reporting all that bad news. “That’s the hell of growing old,” Gil told Walky’s retreating back, “trouble stores up over your natural lifetime to where you had about enough of it. I believe my Amanda’s reached that point.” Gesturing at that place on the pavement where her body had lay. “Life offers more problems than it does solutions. You can’t blame a person for having enough of it. Still, I resent it. It’s damn hard having your wife of fifty-two years ready to pass on you—ready and willing.” Looking at the road again, Gil was certain it had been Amanda lying there. “Apparition,” “Premonition”...whatever you want to call it, scared the b’jesus out of him. Walky went silently on.

“How’m I s’posed to live without you, baby? How’m I s’posed to get by in this world of bad news without you? Answer me that! Good news either for that—if we ever got any! No one to share a damn nothing with.”

It’s what they called a “double-wide”: two trailers stuck together along their lengths, so you got something wide enough to spit across. Recent downpours and wind fury had about done in the roof and carried off the aluminum canopy over the back deck, likely whooshed it up canyon to Lawr and Cora’s place. From what Lawr said half the town was deposited on his acreage in an

airborne junkyard. *You're missing something, just come on up and dig through.* Amanda got a kick out of that; she itemized the various things likely rained down on their heads: *Benson's bad temper, old Granny Whitehead's false teeth, Teensy Hancock (who no one hadn't seen in a coon's age) and the axe they say Judd Hancock sunk in his father's forehead, Melinda Haney's oversize bras* ("How about your own?" Gil asked), *and the crucifix what Hector Dario erected atop his house, along with them Xmas shiver lights adorning it.* Oh, she had a laugh over that. But now, as he approached the trailer, Gil could not tell if his wife was alive inside at all. How could that be, not knowing if your own wife was dead or alive? So was that highway apparition an actual vision of her death? "You wouldn't do that to me, would you, Amanda-Jean? Wait until I go off to die on me? Would you?"

Gil believed if only he could be there to hold her hand and walk her as far as possible towards the other side he might better accept her passing. It might give him a glimpse across the barrier, so to speak, so he could bring some of her death back with him. But he also knew it would be harder for her to let go with him holding onto her; she lacked the strength to wrench herself away from him, as she finally must. His desperate clinging would burden her all the more. What was best for one of them was worst for the other. No way around it. Here at the end of fifty-two years together they faced their biggest disagreement ever—nearly their only. Some damn irony! "You or me, baby," he told the trailer, "one of us is got to sacrifice. I flat know it should be me, goddamnitall. It's me the stronger party here, it's me the healthy party, it's me the so-called 'man of the house,' it's me the one needs to have a bold and sympathetic heart, since I'm the one gets to go on living. There's the rub right there! Living without you won't be no life at all." Gil teared up so he could barely see the trailer, weeds grown up waist high around it, and was ashamed of himself.

They discussed endlessly how they might stage it: ritual-like, clinging and crying together, then he would leave her to go out and pace under the stars. Let her go. But that was predicated on knowing the exact moment of her death. Who can do that? Or he might return home after an outing like today and find her coiled up lifeless in a fetal position like that apparition. Gone. He would perform the ritual of clinging and crying then with her lukewarm

corpse, as if Amanda still occupied it. “Kinda creepy, hon,” he confessed. “Hate to admit so, but it is.”

She wrinkled up her nose in her girlish way, sick as she was. “Yeh, creeps me out real good, too.”

“Maybe I’ll follow close behind you.” Placing a finger to his head and cocking his thumb. “I’ve thought about it plenty.”

“Why, you couldn’t harm a mouse, Gil Ridley, let alone yourself. You know it. You’ll stay on right here in this trailer and grow old surrounded by our memories.”

“Old? Hell! What you think I am already? Old as I need to be.”

“I mean *old!* For the both of us.”

“Are you in there, Amanda?” he called to the trailer now, and thought he made out: *Where else would I be, you dummy?* But if apparitions can lie on the roads their voices can sure enough float on the air. Who was it mentioned seeing naked corpses lying in the woods and said it was over all the trouble they were having lately, perverse as things had gotten—*symbolic of our collective demise, so to speak?* Whoever it was, he thought them looney at the time. No longer. Open your eyes wide enough, no telling what you’ll see.

Perverse wasn’t half of it either. First the Missouri and Mississippi...all them rivers flooding so bad they took out Saint Louis and that country in there and drove people out and became swampland, then drought turned swamps into dried-up-bogs-like, half the world without potable water, the other half with too much of it, crops failing so at first grain prices went through the roof and no one could afford to eat, now there’s flat nothing left to eat, even in places like California that were once bread baskets, markets and governments collapsing, sea waters rising to cover great cities of the earth—half of Europe and Florida and the Gulf coast, what used to be—so any who lived on high ground considered themselves lucky, except, you know, thirsty and half starving to death and living in a state of perverse anarchy. Sluggard’s Creek—what was once hillbilly California—begun to seem blessed ground, civilized and full of decent people. Then, wouldn’t you know it, he was losing Amanda. So even the joy of simple survival was denied them. *Perdamnverse!*

“I’m home,” he called to the trailer.

Amanda wasn’t dead, as he feared she would be, but lying naked in bed, like that apparition. She’d pulled off her clothes, finding them unbearable against her skin, eyes vague and distant, begun

to retreat back in their sockets. Doctor Seathorne had warned she was likely to exhibit odd behavior—craving chocolate sometimes (wherever innahell he'd find it), or wanting to go for a swim in the pond (in her condition!), wanting sex in strange positions, when neither of them could manage sex at all anymore (his prostate had begun to just say no...half about pissing, too), or to see her dead brother, whom she never had any brother, or to clean the house middle of the night ("It makes me feel alive"). He got her comfortable as best he could, the painkillers gone long ago.

Amanda screamed agony through the days and nights. Gil pulled at his ears and begged God's mercy under the stars, beat his forehead bloody against the double-wide (left a dirty brown mark on the metal), took her in his arms and moaned with her; poor woman didn't hardly know he was there. You can drown in pain, like a river sweeping you along; observers on the shore see your pale face passing just under the surface—mouth wrenched open, eyes turned inside out—and they groan and coo for you. But they can't imagine, can't begin to goddamn imagine. Isn't nothing to be expressed in nifty scales from one to ten, but a swallowing completely up in a flood of agony. Still and all, drowning is quick panic. To drown in pain is horrible-slow panic, like Churchys' descriptions of hell and eternal burning. Mixed as such metaphors might be to the learned, it seemed to Gil Ridley that his wife was both drowning and burning at once—sinking in a river of flames far below the swirling surface. Close as they were, he sensed something of her agony; it mortified and enraged him—the unfairness of it. So that contention between them, which had seemed insurmountable just weeks before—whether to grant her permission to die or cling hold to ease his own suffering—evaporated. You cannot lie in bed next to someone you love and tolerate their consumption in a bonfire of pain. Not for long.

He pulled out the pistol he'd bought years ago because Amanda thought he needed a hobby, a silver-plated thirty-eight revolver, and stood shells beside it in a row on the bed table so she would know exactly what he was doing—could weigh them in her hand and become cozy with them. They didn't seem ugly or cruel or deadly or anything much, and he believed they were whatever you wanted them to be, as is so much of life in the end: cruel or merciful, foolish or wise. He was looking intently into eyes from which her soul had

retreated—cornflower blue irises gone cloudy, whites grayed against pale skin, sexy-long lashes invisible now—and for a miraculous instant Amanda sprang back into them in an act of mighty will, swimming up through that fire pond to the surface, and, though no one else would have seen it, he saw her nod assent, saw her right hand, which clutched the blanket, open and move ghostly up to touch her forehead then her chest to indicate she wanted it done properly.

Gil wrote out detailed instructions (because if you have a hard job needs doing, Amanda had taught him, write out just how you will do it; *That's half the battle won*): how he would send Walky up to Lawr Connery's place to bring him and Cora back, knowing the going and coming would give him time, then kiss her tenderly on all his favorite places and cherish the little pucker of thankfulness in her kiss, and promise her he was going to make it all right and bring an end to her pain, then pull the sheet up over her head—that hardest, like he was putting her down in the ground with his own hands—and, this had to be just so, find the fit of the barrel against her forehead. Incredibly, Amanda who could no longer move at all reached up to clutch his wrist with bony fingers and nodded okay. Gil looked out the window, caught a sob at his throat, and pulled the trigger.

Lawr and Walky must do the cleaning up.

He hung her Angels cap from the refrigerator door handle. For Amanda the biggest grief growing out of *the troubles*, was that, first, they could no longer watch baseball games on TV, then major league teams stopped playing altogether. How would life be worth living anymore without baseball season? Sometimes he winged her cap across the room like a frisbee to land where it may, marking the place where her soul set down, and talked to her there. Plunked the cap down on his own head when they finished talking. Just weeks after Amanda passed, Gil started laying out an outfit for her on the sofa bed in the living room each morning—where he himself slept now that he'd discarded the blood-soaked mattress—a different outfit each day, matched like he knew she'd like it. It comforted him to have her reclining there, legs and arms outstretched, baseball cap on her head, shoes where her feet would be.

Isn't none of my doing. It's your clothes, isn't it? Why innahell I'm gonna lay your clothes out on the sofa bed, Amanda? I ain't that nutty yet....Oh, yeah? What reason is that, hon?...The hell! The hell I'm lonely!...It's your cap, isn't it?...My cap? In the broom closet, I'm guessing. Haven't worn it lately. (Touching his head, realized he was wearing it.) Why innahell would I go for a bike ride? Why do I want to get outta the house? Isn't nothing out on those roads but corpses, apparitions and such. That's a threat to your mental health. I'm just holding on as it is....What would I want with your glasses? I don't know where you put them....The hell I'm wearing them. (Of course he was.)

In truth, Amanda lay in the side yard where Lawr and Cora buried her. Took them all day to dig her grave, hard as the ground was, the one who wasn't digging sat inside the double-wide with him and Amanda and talked rot, made them promises he knew there was no keeping. How her death would be a relief to him, a burden lifted. How they understood why he'd done it and would not inform authorities. How folks would come by to visit him. Baloney! Isn't no disease on earth people fear catching more than broken-hearted grief. Truth to tell, he was in a red fog and didn't pay much attention to their nonsense anyway. When the job was done they outlined her grave with stones. All stood up over Amanda-Jean to say goodbye. No Bible verses or none of that. Though Cora read a poem and Walky talked about his mama's passing. Gil wept and muttered. Didn't seem like enough somehow. Now anymore, he went out weekly to rearrange the stones and add more, left her messages in stones, wrote backwards so she could read them from down below: *uoy evol I...uoy ssim I, ebab, nmaD...* all like that, knowing she'd get a kick out of it. Asked where innahell she'd put their marriage certificate and wedding photos anyhow, went out early next morning expecting her to answer, rearrange stones best she could from below. No good. He'd just have to keep at it until he found a question she cared to answer. Amanda was like that.

But what he did with her ceramic figurines worried even Gil himself. Amanda made hundreds of the shiny little statuettes over the years, sold them at craft fairs before *the trouble*. Specialized in frogs and toads, salamanders you might find on Mars or somewheres, with stalk eyes and coiled tongues and intricate feet, warty as allhell. Gave him the creeps. Plus politicians with pop-

eyes and long faces like they'd been caught with their pants down, like most had. Warty, too. Nixon and Reagan and DoubleBush and TripleClinton and Obama and the rest. Amphibians and politicians, swamp creatures all. He removed them from packing boxes and lined them up along couch arms, guarding his feet and head, all along the back of the couch, circled up like half a wagon train on the nappy rug before it—hundreds of shiny little bug-eyed porcelain bastards. He cut out tiny napkin smocks for Chelsea—naked pubescent like Amanda made her, hair flying—some of the others, too (Nixon, for crissake, naked as a jaybird! Amanda was like that). Circled them up around his spot at the dinner table before he ate. Tiny sentinels. *See, there's this article I read once about this kid was a pyromaniac and he done the same thing around his bed: done rings of toy soldiers and superheroes and first responders with plastic squad cars and fire trucks around his bed at night—"to prevent anything bad from happening," he told the headshrinker....Well, goddamn it all, Amanda, I don't know what. Maybe I might shoot myself or light the place afire or swallow Drano. There's times I feel like it....Get out where? What public event is that? Besides, I never went to public events without you. Maybe I could walk the roads with Walky, I'd cover local news, he could handle the international scene: "Midge Talmadge's barn is set to be demolished today, news of Pete Seaver's death is greatly exaggerated..." like that. Lossa fun, right, hon?* All old news, he realized. Truth was, he had no idea what was going on in Sluggard's Creek anymore. He'd lost touch since Amanda died.

You know, I can't call you "baby" no more now you've gone over. At some point in time we all have to grow up. Even you, dear. And if you're not grown up before you die you sure as hell are after....Them little bug-eyed bastards? It comforts me, okay! What innahell else I'm gonna do with 'em? Whenever I got them weird froggies and droopy-faced Richard Nixons goggling me, I feel like you're right here with me. Isn't nobody else crazy enough on this earth could think those up but you. So what you want for dinner, hon? Not there's much choice. Oatmeal or dried-up Wheaties or turnip stew....Who says the dead don't eat dinner? Little as there is, it's like eating nothing anyways.

Early on, Lawr and Cora and his neighbor Pete Seaver stopped around to visit, but Gil slipped out the back into the woods, not in

the mood to see anybody—knowing he'd catch hell from Amanda for it. *Maybe they mean well, but I don't want nobody poking around feeling sorry for me. I'm doing just fine.* Walky maybe. He either talked at you or didn't talk at all. But Walky had stopped walking. Finally they stopped coming. Just as well; his social self had died along with Amanda. Like she took a chunk of him with her. Every few weeks he heard Benson ring the big bell announcing community meetings. Once, he and Amanda would've been the first ones there. He could hear her admonishing him that he needed to get out of the house—six months now since her death and he hadn't hardly talked to nobody.

I don't need to talk to no one; I got you to talk to when I'm lonely, don't I?...Of course you answer, I hear you plain as day....Why isn't it the same thing? I'll tell you what, I miss the sex and I miss the way you made coffee—when we still had any—and I miss your peculiar habits: always checking under the toilet seat before sitting down for fear of black widows....Sure, I knew! Shaking cereal boxes good before pouring out a bowl. What innahell for? How we had sex just about anywhere—community meetings before others arrived, forcrissake. Half embarrassed me sometimes. But I don't miss your scolding one damn bit, Amanda. So don't you start.

The morning he ended her suffering he at first thought he wouldn't be able to do it. He hefted the pistol in his hand, pushed shells into the chambers and spun the cylinder, then set it back down on the night table and shook his head no. Amanda stared up at him, not blankly, though all the color was washed out of her irises and the inner light that had always illumined and shone out of her eyes extinguished...nearly. Just a tiny glimmer far back inside, like a candle glowing at rear of a cave. Her eyes held his, fiercely. The fist clenched tightly against her chest opened and inside was a scrap of paper with a crudely scrawled message: *Yes, you will, Gil Ridley.* The woman knew him, she flat knew him. How innahell had she managed to write it when she couldn't lift her hand off the counterpane? So he did it. Later, he discussed endlessly with her whether he had done the right thing. Begged her forgiveness.

Because often it is not the trouble we expect to have that is the trouble at all but another that grows out of it. Here he had struggled to decide whether to leave her side and let her die or to stay close

and walk her to the other side and the truth turned up neither and nowhere in between but some different and more terrible truth altogether. So after she'd gone he must resolve that earlier conflict on his own—whether to hold her close or walk away and let her go—found himself dodging back and forth between those options many times a day. Chiding himself, “You old coot bastard, can’t you make up your mind at all?”

Gil stumbled out of the double-wide one chilly March morning after a bitter session of self-recrimination which lasted most of the night, exhausted, legs aching, eyes numb and fuzzy. He had the awful feeling that Amanda had abandoned him, disgusted that he could not make peace with the kindness he had done her. However, making his way into the yard he saw signs of activity around her grave. Stones rearranged in a simple message: *Thank you*. The first one she'd left him. Gil collapsed on the spot and wept for gratitude. Who would believe such a thing? The dead do not move stones; they live among the stones but do not argue with them.

“But you are my wife,” Gil was pleading with her as Pete Seaver approached the place. “How could I shoot my own wife, Amanda, the woman I love...whatever reason? Answer me that!”

“You never shot Amanda,” Pete called to him. “Lawr says she took her own life.”

“She couldn’t of, Pete. She lacked the strength for it. I had to do it for her.”

Pete stared at him, likely not wishing to believe it. Surely, if Gil had killed Amanda, Hector Diaz would have arrested him or he would have fled into the hills; he would not still be living here in this place where they'd shared a life together. Didn't make sense. But the stillness of certainty about Gil clearly troubled him. Gil's weren't the hard eyes of a murderer but liquid pools of pain and regret.

“The Lord has witnessed your transgression and has forgiven you,” Pete declared. “If he can forgive Cain, he can forgive Gil Ridley.”

“What innahell d’you know about it, Pete? Anyways, it’s not the Lord’s forgiveness I need, it’s Amanda’s. Maybe you knew somebody once agreed to do a thing they truly disagreed with;

maybe you shoplifted with a high school buddy but disbelieved in it. All the worse when we get older, the things people agree to do. It's like that with Amanda's mercy killing. It's her suggested it, sure. She flat begged me to do it. But what sane person ever chooses to die, pain or no pain? Answer me that!"

"So it's true then? Murder is a capital sin, Gil Ridley. To murder your wife is an abomination before the Lord."

"So that's how it is? The Lord forgives me but you won't?" It's no wonder he'd lost all desire to converse with other people. Always went round in circles and vexed the spirit. But didn't with Amanda. Never. He threw a hand at Pete and went on digging up turnips.

Likely the man left after a time. Gil didn't give a damn. Next day he put up signs around the property: *Keep Out! Hermit on Premises*. He half expected Hector Diaz to come investigating Amanda's death, likely arrest him. Half wanted it. But why would he? The jails were all boarded up, justice system broken down. Truth was, it wasn't God's forgiveness he needed or Amanda's, but his own. No hope there. That night he moved the couch cushions out atop Amanda's grave, fashioned a tarp into a crude tent above them. He would sleep out with her from now on. They could identify birds together at first light, as they'd always done: mockingbirds first (often carrying on with their antic mimicry half the night), early chickadees and grackles, cooing doves, a redtail hawk screeching high overhead. "Earth isn't done in yet, we still have birds." He knew she was glad to have him there, though wouldn't admit it, would scold him for sleeping out in the cold and damp where he was sure to catch his death. Maybe would. He just wanted to share a bed with her again, no matter if it was his deathbed. He arranged her ceramic frogs and politicians in droopy-jowled, bug-eyed ranks around his camp, hung her clothes on hangers from tree limbs in complete outfits like deflated scarecrows. Come next winter, the rain and weather would raise hell with them and leave them in tatters. What did he care? By then he would have clawed his way underground to join her. He felt less substantial every day, increasingly like the apparition he had seen lying on the county road, sucked at last down into a crack in the pavement.

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