

Olde Camden Road

By Robert Welsh

About two years ago, Sean Garrity got a call from his sister, Amanda. She was coming home. Well, she was returning to where they grew up in Pennsylvania, that is. She and her husband Phil had been living in San Francisco for the past four years. I guess she figured she wasn't getting any younger. If she was going to start a family, she might as well do it while she had the youth and energy to do the job right.

Understandably, Amanda raved ad nauseam about the city by the bay and friends on both coasts conceded she was crazy for leaving. But all that beauty and mild weather came with a price tag that could stop your heart. Square footage had been exceedingly tough to come by in any neighborhood worth living in, even with both of them working. There was just no room for them to breed in the city limits. And even if they could figure that part out, the notorious school district busing policies of the day might have sent their little ones right back to the crumbling slums they so desperately tried to avoid, all in the name of proper social engineering. Well, Amanda had no plans to sacrifice her children for the greater good of an enlightened society but the suburbs were no less attractive. Everywhere in the bay area it seemed her only options consisted of multi-million dollar estates amidst the gorgeous albeit foggy hillsides or seedy single units near industrial slag heaps that could reasonably be compared to a de-militarized zone.

After two months of futile searching, she convinced her husband that a happy, affordable life awaited them in her hometown of Elk's Head, just east of the Appalachian foothills. What they would give up in chic restaurants they would get back in snowy back yards and family game night. It took another two months but eventually Amanda speculated that she found a great house in the outskirts of Elk's Head, not far from the town's reservoir which filled to the brim every spring with icy-cold, clear-as-crystal snow runoff from the nearby Poconos. She immediately called her brother and asked him to meet her there to offer his opinion.

"As you can see -- four bedrooms, three bathrooms. Island kitchen. And, you just gotta see this-- a completely refurbished basement. Bet you don't get that out in earthquake-land, huh?" The realtor flashed a winning smile meant to invoke warmth and trustworthiness. Sean figured she had spent, oh, about twenty minutes practicing that look in front of the mirror prior to meeting a client.

Amanda turned to Sean.

"So what do you think?"

In all honesty, Sean knew it was a superb choice. Well-built and spacious. The only thing left to do would be to fill up all those rooms with kids.

“I think I’m gonna be Uncle Sean before I know it,” he replied. “Fresh air. A few friendly neighbors. Nice little schoolhouse nearby.”

Amanda and Phil looked at each other and grinned. Ms. Realtor of the Month started doing the math on her commission while standing in that super-duper island kitchen of hers.

“Sure is a wee bit close to Olde Camden Road though ain’t it, sis?”

That little comment smacked the million-dollar smile right off the Ms. Twenty First Century lady’s lips. She shot him a death stare that screamed, “Are you trying to ruin my quarterlies? You know I have student-loan and car payments, right?”

The Olde Camden Road was, quite simply, unlike any street you’d see anywhere in the county. Curvy and winding, there were very few houses. In fact, just about all the adjoining property consisted of undeveloped, publicly owned woodlands. Naturally, the narrow, two-lane strip ran north and south for a cosmically appropriate thirteen miles.

But none of that had caused Amanda’s realtor to bite her bottom lip with so much tension. Her source of consternation stemmed from the fact that Olde Camden Road had obtained quite a bit of local notoriety as an area rife with many legends of supernatural activity. Ghosts, vanishings, strange gatherings and witchcraft all made their way into the local vernacular over the decades.

Even growing up on the other side of town, Sean and Amanda heard all the folklore. From the moment Sean hit high school, stories of upper classmen who ventured too far down the road burned through the corridors like wildfire.

“Dude, a phantom pick-up truck totally appeared out of nowhere and chased us back to the intersection! Then it just plain disappeared, man.”

“God’s honest truth. If you stop on the bridge halfway down the road and look over the side, the ghost of a boy pushes you off to save you from being run over as he was in real life.”

“Seriously, though. Satan worshippers used to meet back in those woods for years to sacrifice animals and stuff.”

As age and reality sunk in, however, it became clear that the road was mainly a modern haven for isolated hiking in the daylight and teenaged sex and drinking come nightfall. Like many a kid, life got in the way as Sean grew up, got a job, and took on the normal responsibilities and everyday tribulations of

adulthood. The Olde Camden Road was forgotten. Out of sight and out of mind unless some pathetically pony-tailed, wanna-be Soderbergh had been observed strolling into town pumped chock full of hope that he'd soon hit it big with his "groundbreakingly creepy" documentary nobody would eventually buy off his low-budget website. Or perhaps more foreboding, Sean would pick up the local newspaper and read about another car wreck along the road.

All kidding aside, Olde Camden Road played host to an inordinate number of fatal auto accidents. Skeptics would quickly point out that the isolated terrain and lack of proximate emergency resources were the true source of such inevitable dismal statistics, not the paranormal handiwork of spookies and ghosties. In the end, everyone could make their own judgments about Olde Camden Road.

"Everyone" included Amanda, who would hardly be scared off by the fact that the turn-off to Olde Camden Road lay half a mile down the street. Like many, she outgrew the dark fairy tales long ago. She was a well-travelled student of the world now. And while she doubted she would be taking any chances with her little ones, the current topic on the table concerned a miles-long, occasionally trafficked road, not a cave or a well or something else in the backyard an adorable seven-year-old could wander into while she was in the shower. The chances of her loved ones finding danger on the internet or under the school bleachers far exceeded the chances that demon spawn or ghouls or cults or whatever had camped out on a remote road in Pennsylvania in the hopes of destroying mankind, one driver at a time, right?

Nevertheless, Sean could tell his sister got the point of his question immediately. Specifically, the realtor need not know Amanda ignored all those bedtime stories. After all, locals took the tales seriously enough. That factoid alone probably cost her a sale or two. And how many other out-of-towners would be coming to Nowhere, Pennsylvania gobbling up property in this economy? Probably not many. In short, lingering concerns about the proximity to Olde Camden Road were good for at least a five percent drop in the asking price. The realtor swallowed hard as she realized everyone in the room with her knew that too.

Sean smiled as he drove away from her sister's future home. He felt good. As well he should have. His sister had asked him for some assistance and he had come through. Not only could he offer a heartfelt endorsement of the place, he saved her a bit of coin in the process. Not bad for the sibling who never left his hometown of Bumblescum, Pennsylvania. Ok, it wasn't that bad. He had friends. He had a wife. Not exactly his high school sweetheart but she also grew up in Elk's Head, snowboarding in the winter like all the kids did and working at the water park in the summer, outfitting customers with life jackets or inner tubes for the various slides and such. Most nights he wondered what happened to that fun-loving girl-

next-door type he married. These days it seemed she complained non-stop about bills or leaky gutters or why he hadn't gotten a promotion at work in five years.

Sean swallowed his resentment in silence. At the end of the day, he deemed himself good soldier. He wasn't sure if he should have married Elaine but he promised he would do it so he did. And he'd been a loyal husband ever since. You couldn't say that about a lot of their friends who had gotten married around the same time. Now the eyes of many a newly divorced tigress batted cheap fake eyelashes at him through fresh crow's feet nearly every time he drove through Elk's Head to pick up a pizza on his way home from work. In their minds he was exactly what they needed... a man who could make a commitment and stick with it. The fact that he already made it to another woman was unfortunate, forgivable, and most importantly, correctable once he had a roll in the hay with one of them.

Some days Sean wished she wasn't so oblivious to all that. He didn't lead the most exciting of lives but it was hardly dishonorable. Sometimes, he wished Elaine would appreciate that more. Lately it seemed all she ever did was bust his balls for living out the same, boring routine that allowed them to remain married and comfortable for ten years.

Amanda, on the other hand, could never be accused of letting one of life's adventures pass her by. First came four years of college in New York City, with one of those semesters spent studying abroad in Rome. After that came an internship in Paris and six months teaching English in Tokyo. She'd call home once a week and tease their conservative parents about how millions of Asians were learning English everyday while back in Los Estados Unidos fewer folks bothered to speak English at all. Finally, her future husband Phil was able to tame the wander-lusting beast that was Amanda. Now she dreamed about swing sets and PTA meetings and Sunday dinners.

Sean approached the intersection to Olde Camden Road from the south and paused at the traffic light. If he turned right, this would be the last traffic light he'd see for quite a while. Hell, it would be the last of anything he saw for a while. The thoroughfare connected two sparsely populated areas in an out of the way manner with absolutely no connecting streets or outlets. The state of Pennsylvania didn't even consider it a part of their county-highway system. However, they did send a maintenance crew into the heart of Olde Camden Road to repair a small bridge after some severe flooding one summer. Naturally, the workers finished the job in record time and beat it out of there, sharing more than a few tales of eerie happenings that befell them as they did so.

Well Sean had never been to Paris or Tokyo and he sure as hell didn't speak any other languages.

Not that he could remember for sure at the moment but he felt confident he didn't even have a passport. He had no children and the wife that waited at home would soon be asleep in front of the television. In Sean's mind that was a blessing since she'd undoubtedly nag him for taking so long once he got back anyway.

He'd taken no chances with his life. Never risked a thing. Well that was about to change. He had already helped Amanda today, the one woman he knew who never needed help with anything. Maybe he was on a lucky streak. Starting tonight he was going to suckle a bit more of life's marrow. And it would all begin with the crossroads before him. He could still remember when he first got his driver's license. It happened during that blissful decade after the Cold War's end and the War on Terror's commencement, when gas cost eighty-eight cents per gallon and the Fresh Prince and the Fly saved the world from aliens at the box office. It was as if Americans had conquered the last of our enemies on earth so we had to invent new ones in city-sized spaceships which we, of course, went on to defeat in heroic fashion. Back then, the only danger lay up Olde Camden Road. Unfortunately, it was strictly off limits by order of his father. No exceptions.

"I don't care if it's your mother stranded out there on her way to see her mother. No excuses."

If the ghosts or whatever awaited visitors didn't get him, his parents surely would if he survived. End of story. To this day all locals gave their kids that same warning, just as their parents had warned them. And so on all the way back to colonial days when a writer first warned travelers against frequenting the road, citing reports of banditry and witchcraft in the area.

And always the good son, Sean obeyed. After all, he had seen the original eighteenth century news pamphlet detailing the unsettling warning under glass at the local library. But that was neither here nor there. Tonight, he was going to live a little. On the news recently he heard a politician criticize his opponent, alleging the wealthy heiress had been born on third and somehow convinced herself she hit a triple. Sean had whined to himself about never even getting in the game when in fact he had been standing at the plate all along watching pitch after pitch goodbye. Well tonight he was going to take a nice cut. Who knows, in time he just might be swinging for the fences just like his sister.

On that note, Sean fired his sedan into gear and turned down Olde Camden Road.

For such a unique thruway, Olde Camden Road actually got its name in the same, pedantic way all "Camden" municipalities in the United States did. During the revolutionary era when English taxation was the great issue of the day, a solitary noble in the British Parliament named Lord Camden defiantly opposed

the government's punitive levies on the colonists. The news made him somewhat of a celebrity in the American states and numerous burgeoning settlements were named in his honor. One such settlement had been established back in these woods. And though it had long since vanished, the only road built to reach it remained.

In a couple minutes, Sean was about a mile into tonight's "cut." "Tonight," however, had to be interpreted fairly loosely. For starters, the car stereo read four o'clock. The sun was still out. That certainly diffused much of the potential uneasiness of the situation. It was early November though and the clocks had already been shifted forward for the winter. It would definitely be dark soon enough. That was fine by Sean. He considered a nighttime drive an essential part of the experience. Now he would get to see some of the actual scenery first before tasting the notorious, mounting dread that accompanied any account of those who experienced Olde Camden Road up close in the dark.

Beep beep BEEP... Strange electronic sounds emanated from his blue jeans. Sean had been cruising along at about thirty miles per hour. He took his foot off the gas a little while he unbuckled his seat belt to reach into his front pocket and pull out his cell phone. He knew there was no call. That triggers an altogether different ringtone. The most recent beeps simply notified him that he left his plan's coverage area.

Hmmph. Nice touch. He thought to himself. I guess that should have been expected now that thought about it. Looks like he was on his own. So far so good, though. The woodlands encroached right to the narrow lanes' edge. That and the fact that many of the leaves had blown off added to the eeriness of it all. But the ones that remained were still strikingly pretty. Had he been here a month ago, the whole drive might have held its own with the best of the autumn New England scenic routes.

Things tensed for the first time when he reached a clearing. He couldn't have been more than three miles in when the thick brush gave the Olde Camden Road a bit of breathing room. About fifty yards of grass lay to the east of him, carving out what could only be described as a quaint meadow. Sean's heart palpitated, not because he stumbled onto some Eden-esque garden or even a future picnic site for his family. To the contrary, he quickly decided to drive on immediately. There, on the furthest outskirts of the clearing, several oddly dressed individuals stood, staring blankly right back at him. They wore what Sean guessed were dark crimson robes. None spoke. They didn't move or acknowledge him or even each other. They just stared, expressionless, until Sean disappeared out of sight.

Okay, that's a tad unsettling, Sean admitted to himself as he tried to figure out what those people

were doing out here in all this wilderness. He saw no vehicles since he began his little detour -- not coming the other way and certainly not parked anywhere near where those people had been standing. Yet, they had to come from somewhere. After all, while he obviously couldn't be sure, he could have sworn he... felt several more sets of eyes further back amidst the tree line.

Well, no matter. It had been two more miles since the weirdoes in the clearing and there was no indication anyone had followed him. Not that they had to, though. There was only one direction to go. Sean relaxed a little. He checked his cell phone – still no reception. Something else had caught his eye, however. Off to his left, several yards back in the forest but nonetheless visible in the rapidly disappearing sunrays, there stood the hollowed out remains of what was once a colonial-era stone structure.

The place had many names. Most locals called it the “the ruins.” To his old classmates, “the castle,” sufficed. For still others in the county watershed commission responsible for the land, it was simply “the furnace.” Apparently, during the revolutionary war, the continental army constructed a forge there for casting iron until the French came to the rescue with cannons and musket balls and such.

But that was just one legend. Many a lifelong resident of Elk's Head would swear on the bible Sean was looking at the remains of an old castle built by some forgotten, nineteenth century tycoon who abandoned construction after losing everything in the great depression. Other exotic explanations gained tractions over the years too. The honest truth was lost in time. Nevertheless, when it came to the tales of secret clan meetings or witches' covens or animal sacrifice along Olde Camden Road, they usually took center around the bowels of this hollowed-out, crumbling stonework now obscured by the overgrown foliage.

Sean pulled the car over as best he could. There was no shoulder but that hardly presented a problem as he had yet to see another vehicle. His eyes scanned the rear view mirror. Nothing approached from behind. He thought things over for a moment. He very well could have dodged a bullet back there in the clearing. And just because he didn't see any cars didn't mean they weren't there. Unwelcome strangers could be on him before he knew it.

On the other hand, this is what he wanted right? A little excitement... perhaps even a little danger. If he wasn't going to check it out, what was he doing out here anyway? Of course it might be stupid. This whole trip was. Hell, if his wife found out, it's not like she would deem his little excursion less moronic if he sped straight through without ever leaving his car. If he wanted the Olde Camden Road experience, here it was in all its creepy, dilapidated glory.

Sean wouldn't exactly call it a path, but previous travelers had worn out a visible trail from the road to the ruins. He covered the distance in barely two minutes. Up close, the crumbling furnace or castle or whatever it was didn't disappoint. Sean thought they stood a couple cobblestone streets right on their sides. Portions were definitely missing and others looked as if they were sinking into the earth. Nevertheless, what remained was imposing, casting long shadows in the fast-approaching dusk. Sean's first thoughts were of Hollywood-types who inexplicably hadn't scouted this location. Between the authentic stonework and lack of power lines, Sean thought he could be standing in medieval Europe. Seriously, the state's entire debt could be voided with studio cash from all the grizzly horror movies that should have been set here.

Mark entered the ruins through a doorless, rectangular-shaped passageway. There was no interior structure. No roof neither. What it did have was a rickety network of wooden beams and buttresses. All were rotten and brittle. Many were broken altogether. They gave the entire area a hazardous feel. Beer cans and broken bottles also littered the floor. While dodging the wood with his head, he was hard-pressed to step anywhere that didn't result in a crinkle or crunching sound beneath his leather work boot. To complete the utterly disgusting feel, graffiti decorated most everything. Nearly all of it was illegible. That was fine by him, though, as what he could decipher had been far more disturbing. Anarchy symbols were one thing, but the pentagrams were a bit more ominous... and far fresher.

The sun hung very low in the sky now. It would disappear for good within minutes and the temporary afterglow would be all Sean had for navigation. He pondered the best use of his remaining visibility. Near the top of the inside walls he saw a bit more writing. He doubted it was in English. If it was, it sure wasn't the kind of English that had been spoken in a very long time. If anything, the cryptic phrases had been scrawled in Greek or Latin. He would need a closer look to know for sure. And he wanted that look but not because he was some budding amateur entomologist. He wanted to see them because they were, quite simply, in a location that was impossible to reach.

The ruins were thoroughly hollowed out, but a partial wooden staircase still ran up the side of one of the walls. If it held, he might be able to get close enough to read it. He might even be able to see over the top of the structure. From such a vantage point, he could probably get a majestic sunset view of the forest, including the reservoir and even a panoramic view of Olde Camden road from start to finish, no doubt the best use of his remaining visibility.

Sean treaded lightly with only one foot at first. There was no handrail to distribute his weight and

it creaked as he lifted his other leg off the ground but the first stair held. As did the second and third, all the way to the sixth. Now came the tricky part. The staircase was interrupted. Getting to the next stair would require a clever hop. It would have to hold his bodyweight on impact but from there he was clear all the way to the top. Sean figured he weighed about two hundred pounds with all his gear. He bounced a little on the balls of his feet to see how his current perch responded. So far so good.

He gave himself a half-hearted reality check for a moment. Witches and phantoms were one thing. This here though -- this was a tangible danger by anyone's imagination. If he broke his leg or something, there was no way to tell when someone else might come along. And although the wind died with the afternoon sun, night would bring frigid temperatures. He'd freeze out here before he starved. But therein lay the rush. He already knew he what he was going to do. After all, he'd come this far. He wanted an adventure all his own, right? Well, here it was. Sean checked his cell phone and smirked. Just as before, no coverage. He tucked the device back into his pant pocket, blessed himself, and leapt.

Disaster. Shock and fear pulsed through him as the landing stair broke on impact. He clawed at the surviving step above it as he fell but that gave way too. He couldn't believe how fast he accelerated back to earth. He landed square on his upper back first but that wasn't the worst part. Falling wood planks followed him down, a large chunk of which nailed him straight in the forehead.

There was no pain at first. But after a few seconds, shooting pain throbbed in several places, each more intense than the next. Sean barely knew which injury to address first. As a reflex, he sat up. Since he could still do that, he checked his abdomen for injury, followed quickly by his arms and legs. He breathed heavily with fear for his life and embarrassment at his stupidity. But after a minute or too, he calmed. He had several scrapes and bruises but with each passing moment he gained confidence he was going to be all right. Before he knew it, Sean sat amidst the beer cans and Doritos wrappers and laughed.

Shit. Good thing I blessed myself. He thought to himself. He guessed that was his one freebee. God probably wanted him to get the hell out now. He'd oblige.

Sean limped his way back to car. His head and several rattled bones ached like never before. He also felt a warm, wet sensation above his eyes which he instinctively wiped on a cold sleeve. A residue of dirt and blood smeared onto his hand, making the car door handle slippery as he slipped inside.

Well. Enough adventure for one evening. He thought to himself. He tried to examine his forehead in his mirrors but it was just too dark now. Sean figured that quitting while he was ahead was not exactly the same as quitting. He fire up his car and sped on his lonesome way. With normal pacing he could finish

Olde Camden Road and start back toward Elk's Head in ten minutes or so. For all his bumps and bruises, Sean felt remarkably well.

The road, however, was just getting started. Just as Sean had relaxed, even fiddling with the radio for some music as he lost interest in the road, his rear view mirror lit up. The glare highlighted how quickly his eyes had adjusted to the darkness. Surprise quickly gave way to curiosity. Curiosity then gave way to fear. A vehicle operated erratically directly behind him. He had no idea how another car could have approached so close without detection. Even if Sean's tail lights aided in navigation, traversing an area this dark without your own headlights should have proven damn near impossible, even if you were a local with intricate knowledge of the roadway.

Sean took the strip at about forty miles per hour now while the lights swerved back and forth immediately behind him. Though there was ample room to pass, the thing never tried to do so. But it did periodically come dangerously close to his rear bumper.

This must be the phantom truck, Sean thought to himself as he took in the sight. The phantom truck that chased you out of Olde Camden Road was one of the area's most notorious legends and one of the first he heard of as a kid. The notion gave him a thrill. He subconsciously pushed the speedometer over 45.

Well, whatever it was it sure didn't disappoint. With lights far too bright for Sean to see who, if anyone controlled them, the mysterious phenomenon continued on his its angry way. It resembled a speeding motorist stuck behind a slow-poke moseying about their way in the express lane, feigning obliviousness to the conspicuous bottleneck in their wake.

But Sean wasn't moseying. He drove at maximum alertness while he awaited whatever came next. At his current rate of speed, he'd be done with the road in about five minutes. Surely, who or whatever followed him will have vanished by then. He'd never know the origins of Olde Camden Road's greatest secret. After all this, that would have just gnawed him day after day once he returned to his mundane, inconsequential life.

Well not tonight. He'd come this far. In an evening full of firsts, Sean doubled down yet again and slammed on the breaks. The pressure wasn't hard enough to screech the tires to a sudden stop but he had his sedan down to 20 miles per hour in a few seconds.

Your move, buddy, he thought as he waited several tense moments for a reaction. As before, the "phantom truck" continued its pattern, pursuing aggressively but never pulling up alongside or ramming

from behind. Sean's confidence grew. He obtained no new information of its identity. However, whatever it was, it clearly stuck to rules of menacing without actually initiating contact. It threatened but its intent seemed to involve little more than fright.

Sean now decided to flush out the mystery of the phantom truck once and for all, even if no one believed him later. A few more taps on the brake and his car crawled to a stop. His pursuer could either pass or stop too. It did the latter. As before, the headlight continued to shield what lay behind. The beams were obviously on high. Nevertheless, Sean could still make out a few details. For example, true to the legend it was indeed a truck. The lights were higher than his own car – too high to be anything other than a pick-up. And it now honked angrily to urge him to get a move on.

But Sean did no such thing. With a deep breath and a spell of fortitude that would have shocked him only a night ago, he unlocked the door, stepped out onto the road, and faced his potentially supernatural assailant.

Your move, buddy.

Indeed it was. For about thirty agonizingly endless seconds, nothing happened. Eventually, the driver's side door of the phantom truck of Olde Camden Road clicked and creaked open. The high beams shifted to low, and Sean looked at a man holding a high-powered rifle.

"Move and you're dead," the person called out to him, the barrel pointed squarely at Sean's chest.

A bit of laughter erupted from the darkness.

"Don't say that," a different voice joked in the dark, "technically you just gave him permission to go." Sean's stomach jumped as he learned there were several others in the vicinity. Clearly they had ridden in or on back of the flatbed truck too. By now they had fanned out, covering much of the vicinity around him. Sean grew exceptionally nervous as he suspected he pushed his luck once too often on this dark November night.

"Who are you guys?" Sean called out.

More laughter ensued.

"God," someone said. This time, the voice was female. "Can't you people ever think of any different questions to ask?"

"What's going on?" Another voice scoffed, clearly imitating another motorist on Olde Camden Road.

"What's gonna happen to me?" Yet another blurted out in a mocking tone.

Sean's head turned toward the sound each time but he made out nothing. He casually backed toward his car but the sound of the rifle cocking put an end to that.

"Who are we?" the man with the gun said in a stern voice. "We are the ones who will tell you what to do for the next few moments which will be the last of your miserable life. Now get in the truck."

Sean, keeping his hands where they could see them, climbed into the "phantom pick-up." In horror, he watched someone get into his sedan and pretty soon they all started back the way he came.

Once Sean's hands were bound, his captors grew surprisingly light-hearted. He spectated in silence as they playfully went through his wallet, passed around his license and cell phone and took his cash.

"Go ahead, let's hear it." One of them said to him. "We know you're dying to ask us a million questions."

Sean said nothing. He didn't have to know everything about everything to understand that a bullet to the head takes care of any problem. So if they didn't use the rifle back there on the road, they likely had plans for him. Still, if this truly was the end, he already decided he wasn't going to beg for his life in a fit of futile entertainment for some crazed maniacs.

"Look," the same captor said, "you people always fall into two categories. Those that can't stop trying to figure what is happening in order to talk their way to safety, and those that sit there in suffering silence, pretending to be in shock but actually planning some inevitably ill-fated escape. You're miles from help in every direction. Plenty of us and one of you. And look around, you might as well be in the Andes. You're not going anywhere, so don't bother with the latter category."

Sean studied his driver. He sported a pair of night vision goggles no longer in use above his eyebrows. That's how he was able to approach so close without headlights. They were prepared. They've done this before.

"Why are you doing this?" Sean asked.

"That's a good boy. Don't read too much into it, son. It's nothing personal. We've controlled this road for generations, chasing out everyone from lost commuters to drunken teenagers. We only get to meet those who truly chase us all the way down the rabbit hole. So this is actually really exciting for us too--"

Sean didn't wait for him to finish. He had already done the cold math in his mind. They didn't care what he learned about them. They didn't care that he had seen their faces. That meant only one thing. He wasn't going to survive. With that in mind, he made a frantic lunge for the steering wheel, attempting to

swerve and crash the truck. With some luck he could roll the whole thing over. If he survived the mangled wreck in better shape than his new friends here, he just might be able to escape in the confusion and make his way into the night. It was a long shot, but it's all had.

He came gut-wrenchingly close, even grasping the wheel with both hands at one point. Unfortunately, several restraining arms were instantaneously upon him. They grabbed shoulders, an arm, and even fistfuls of hair as they ripped him back into position. The driver flinched but never lost control. Once Sean was secured, the same man spoke to him, noticeably more exasperated than before.

"Now what did you have to do that for? And here we were just getting to know each other and you have to behave like a horse's ass."

He punched Sean square in the jaw, whose teeth clenched and slammed into each other from the impact. Defeated and dazed, he began to pray quietly. More snickering erupted.

"Taking your appeal to a higher power, huh? Terrific. If only you knew how ironic that is."

About a minute or two later, the truck rolled to a stop. Two of the more goon-ish individuals manhandled him out of the vehicle and shoved him away from the road. Sean struggled for his freedom but was no match for the superior size and strength of his captors, especially when one punched him heartily in the stomach for resisting. After several steps of this he just went limp, figuring a two-hundred pound dead weight was at least inconvenient as hell to whatever they had planned.

Darkness still reigned over Olde Camden Road, especially once all the headlights went out. But it wasn't absolute. To Sean's surprise no one needed flashlights or anything else as they shuffled him into the woods. In fact, he could see his own feet, dangling above strangely familiar earth. In another moment he knew why.

He was back at the ruins. Only this time, light poked out from each dilapidated crevice and opening. The "furnace" was aglow once again with fire. No longer did it burn with the hot iron and lead of the American Revolution but rather something far more sinister. Sean put his feet down to avoid being thrown inside. And as he stepped through the doorway, he saw several controlled pyres, each presided over by five or more enrobed individuals. There could have been dozens in all, and Sean felt several more moving about the darkened outskirts not sufficiently illuminated by the firelight. Freshly scrawled cryptic symbols adorned the walls, especially pentagrams. Perhaps most surreal of all, Sean could have sworn a keg rest in a plastic bucket of ice in the corner not far from a portable altar. Several wannabe druid-folk casually waited their turn to fill up their red plastic cup.

"This him?" A hooded man mutter to one of his captors.

"Yep. He's a local boy. Anyone know him?"

A captor handed over his identification. The hooded man squinted to read the information via fire light.

"We got a Sean Garrity. Anyone know a Sean Garrity here?" He called out to the rest and held up his license. "Sean Garrity. 35 High Street down in Elk's Head. Anyone?"

They all looked at each other but no one spoke up. Sean had a lot of trouble making out any faces with the hoods up but he doubted he recognized any of them either.

"Please let me go." He said to the license holder, who he presumed to be a leader of whatever kind of tribe this was.

"Let you go, huh?" The man smiled a terrible smile. Even with the limited visibility, Sean could see some of his teeth were missing. Of those that remained, some were charcoal black. Back in Elk's Head, they used to call it "Mountain Dew Mouth," a not-so subtle dig at the sweet-loving rednecks who used to feature more prominently in the Appalachian regions further south.

"Hmm, maybe we should. After all, I bet if you make it out of this, you'll probably never take your pathetic, meaningless life for granted again. First thing you'll do when you get home is make love to your wife or girlfriend or whatever like you never have before. Then you'll take your mother out to Applebee's and order the biggest steak they got. And it'll taste sweeter than anything you ever tasted in your life. John my boy, cut this guy loose."

"Yes, sir." Sean heard behind him. The death grip that held him in place instantly loosened.

"You know what? Hang on for a minute, John-boy. Bring our friend over here a minute."

The chokehold around Sean's neck and shoulders instantly returned. With blunt force, they forced him to his knees directly in front of the leader.

"Think I just changed my mind. You know how long we've been out here in this wilderness? Longer than my great granddaddy can remember. Our ancestors first came out here and established this little settlement. Since then we've watched from the woods since we took this here land from the Injuns. It was said they cursed it when they left. But how does one damn the legion of the fallen? So here we've gathered since before even the dawn of the current nation. We've watched society build itself up then destroy itself again and again. Encroach closer to us, then pull back."

At this point, more people in robes came forward, dragging two more prisoners as they did so. One

looked a man of about forty. His eyes bulged with tension. The other was a boned girl of maybe twenty. She could have been his daughter, though Sean could hardly be certain. Both were bound and gagged but that didn't stop her from trying to plead her case for mercy or freedom with whatever sounds one can still make with a handkerchief jammed in your mouth. They were tossed on their faces next to Sean.

"And you know what we've learned through the generations?" The leader went on. "No matter how much the outside world changed, we'll never want for fresh meat for our rituals. From horse carriages to sports cars, and everything invented in between -- people always come our way looking for more. They have a hunger that can't be filled with Ipods or Starbucks or Facebook. They want to believe in more. They have to believe there's something else out there beyond what they can see or taste or click on.

Naturally, not all are loners like yourself. Some are stupid kids. Others are too skittish and can't be corralled without making a scene we sure as hell would rather do without. But that's okay. We put a scare in them once in a while -- just enough to keep the legend going. Of course, thanks to the internet, they'll soon be traffic jams back there and Asian tour buses with matching hats and souvenir stands selling cheap crap and the like."

While he spoke, two robed figures hauled an old tree stump into the center of the ruins. Another led out a full-grown goat on a leach. He kept the animal too busy to resist by distracting it with small handfuls of salty-snack chips from a cellophane Frito-Lay bag.

The leader watched gleefully while all three captives stared in muted terror as everyone donning a crimson robe started to chant. He lowered his own voice a bit, directing his words solely at Sean.

"The ones who end up where you are now are people who live out their days, thinking some imaginary, alternative life awaits out there -- so much more exciting than the mundane routines currently ensnaring them like cheap flypaper. But once the realization sets in that that world is gone forever, they cling and claw for it like grim death. All they want is for things to go back to the way they were. Fascinating, really."

The chanting grew louder now and all the cultists retrieved black masks from the folds of the folds of their robes and strapped them to their faces. One whose mask vaguely resembled some kind of bird head stepped forward, a machete in his right hand. At the predetermined moment in the chant, he raised the weapon high over his head. A moment later everyone went silent at once. He then brought the machete down square on the goat's neck.

It wasn't a clean chop. The machete became embedded in the animal's spine, forcing him to press

his foot against the body for the necessary leverage to pry the blade loose and try again. The goat screeched and lurched horribly. Blood squirted and spilled everywhere. The little blonde female prisoner looked as if she might pass out from the whole, awful sight.

Eventually, bird head man finished his handiwork. They dismembered the goat and used the bloody nubs of the hoof to draw a pentagram on top of the tree stump in goat's blood. Now it was their turn. The older man was first. He thrashed about violently but eventually they got him on his knees in front of the stump, his ear pressed down on the face, smearing the pentagram. His arms were bound behind his back but he could still kick. He did so as disruptively hard as he could, letting no energy go to waste. Alas, his efforts were to no avail. Three men held him down while the machete did its job.

Blondie came next. She put up much less of a fight. To Sean it seemed she had already slipped deep into shock. Her eyes no longer pleaded for salvation. She was mentally somewhere else. But that didn't stop a few masked women from taunting her.

"It's gonna be alright. You'll see."

"You're only dreaming. You're gonna wake up in a better place soon."

"You don't know how lucky you truly are, honey."

One more swing and that was that. Now they shuffled Sean forward to the killing stump. Bird head cleaned his blade while they forced him into position. His cheek slapped against uncomfortably warm and bloody wood. Chanting continued. As with the others, Sean knew the jig was up as soon as it reached its crescendo. Although most of his brain frantically tried to figure a way out of this, there was at least one part that knew that madman was right. He deserved this. He just couldn't be happy with his marriage, with his job, with his life. He just had to go and fuck everything up, chasing ghosts and monsters out into the darkness. He just couldn't just pick up a pizza and a gallon of milk when necessary and watch football on the satellite dish on Sundays and go bowling once a week with his buddies and tickle the wife once in a while. No, he had to be special. And now it cost him everything.

Everyone chanted except for the talkative leader. He just whispered to Sean what he muttered to the others.

"You know, Mr. Garrity, you're very lucky. Fate brought you here tonight. Satan's chosen you. For redemption."

With that, the chanting abruptly ceased again. Sean squeezed his eyes shut and hoped for the best.

When he opened them again, he saw only blackness. And stars. His head throbbed. Instinctively, he rushed his hand to his head to tend to where the pain emanated. As he did so, he realized his hands were free. Better than that, he was no longer a prisoner. He was alone in the ruins. He sat up with quite a bit of pain. Broken wood was all around him. Looking upward, barely anything remained from the steps that took you to the top of the wall of the “furnace.”

Sean’s head throbbed and he felt dried blood from cuts and bruises on just about every limb. He knew that must have been some fall. The right side of his pants had been thoroughly torn and he couldn’t put any weight on that leg. He was also freezing. All his fingers and toes were numb from the cold and he could easily see his breath. Sean knew he wouldn’t truly feel the extent of his injuries until he got some of the feeling back.

But that was going to have to wait a little longer. Sean looked around in a dazed shock. Did he really just dream all that? Surely evidence of the encounter would be everywhere but it was way too dark to see. He checked his pockets. His wallet and keys were both there. So was his cell phone, which he held up for information and meager light. He still had no bars but the clock worked. It read 3:42am. He had apparently been out for several hours.

Getting to his feet was definitely a challenge. Making his way to his car would be a monumental struggle considering his injuries and the pitch blackness of the night. There was no moon. The little buttons on his cell phone screen would have to do while maintaining his fragile balance. As he felt his way through the darkness, his thought his shoe crunched over a cellophane snack wrapper.

He followed the walls of the castle until he reached an entry point. Once he got close enough, his keys contained a button that unlocked his car remotely and turned on the interior lights. From there it was easy. He still had to be careful lowering himself into the car, however. His head pounded away. Knees and ankles creaked gingerly when he shifted his weight.

Sean drove straight out of Olde Camden Road without incident. From there he made his way directly home. Originally, he thought he would head straight for the emergency room. He had bumps and bruises to spare and x-rays would undoubtedly be needed. But how was he going to tell them he got injured? His story was at best embarrassing if it weren’t so completely unbelievable, even for nurses and trauma surgeons who’ve seen and heard it all. Regardless, he wasn’t yet ready to confront what, exactly, had happened to him tonight.

Plus, he began to feel noticeably better the moment he saw familiar streets. In fact, by the time he

approached his own neighborhood, he felt downright terrific. Oh, bones still ached and scrapes still burned with their exposure to the air. But by the time he pulled into his garage, a kind of euphoria overtook him that no pharmacy drug could emulate in his bloodstream.

As expected, Elaine lay under a blanket on the couch. Though the television was off, she had at least tried to wait up for him. His opening of the door hadn't awoken her so he stood over her for a moment while she dozed. The current situation proved she could still make for an adorable sight. Her mouth was slightly agape. Bangs dangled about her forehead like little whiskers. For a time she reminded him of that tan, seventeen-year-old, freckled cutie he flirted with at the water park. Back in those days he would pick her up and they drove to the reservoir, taking turns making out and swimming. He never forgot driving eighty miles an hour to make it home before curfew, lest his father take his wheels away and essentially paralyze his social life.

That girl was long gone now though. The harried, complicated woman in front of him was all that remained. Sean pushed through the pain to kneel down in front of her. He stroked her hair. As he did so, she stirred. In that trance-like state between sleep and awake, she called out to him softly.

"Sean, is that you? I waited for you."

"I know, darling. It's okay. I'm here."

Elaine's eyes stayed closed but she meekly lifted her head in his direction.

"Are you okay, Sean? Are we gonna be okay?"

Sean gently led her head back to the pillow and pulled the blanket up to her chin for extra warmth. Once she was out again, he carefully slipped onto the sofa next to her.

"It's a long story, Elaine. But I'm okay. We are okay."

He stoked her hair some more. "It's been a rough road at times. But we're gonna be fine. Sleep now. Everything is going to be different in the morning."