



## The Requisite Desolation

### ONE

Driving south and drunk on moonshine, Oscar was going over ninety miles an hour in the dark while sucking boiled peanuts out of their shell and pitching the empties out the window. The bugs were bad, the wiper fluid reservoir was empty and Oscar could barely see the road. It had to be close to one in the morning, so he had the two-lane road all to himself. He drove down the centerline because he could. *Jesus*, he thought, *what kind of idiot lives this close to the Everglades and lets their wiper fluid run dry? Oh yeah, it would be the same idiot whose life work had culminated with a gas station night shift at the junction of State Road Bumfuck East and County Road Bumfuck South*. That's where Oscar found both the boiled peanuts and the '67 Barracuda. An idiot, but an idiot with good taste in cars. Oscar wondered if the idiot would appreciate the Audi he left behind. No hotwiring skills required, because he'd left the keys. Even an idiot

should be able to figure out it was an even swap. At least, that's what Oscar believed, but then again, Oscar was a dick.

Oscar was the kind of person who said the f-word as frequently as the average person said um. He was always looking to get as much as he could while doing as little as possible. This was Oscar's world, and everyone else just lived in it. Oscar used to take these desolate roads on a regular basis back in the '90's. In his young and foolish years, a time when he was sure that he stood ten feet tall and was bulletproof, he made a living running cocaine out of Miami. Business often took him to places like Gainesville, Tampa and Orlando—sometimes as far north as Atlanta—so he had learned every back route without a police department that bypassed the major arteries connecting cities.

Oscar's aversion to major roadways never went away. He grew up in Florida and remembered when you could actually get somewhere on the roads. In today's Florida, every city, not just the beach towns, had become so congested with traffic that everything crawled from one moronically timed traffic light to the next. He remembered a time in Florida when you could just drive. He remembered a time when you could drive on the beach, for fuck's sake. Those days were gone. These days, every roadway within twenty miles of an interstate or the Overseas Highway was unbearably clogged year-round with snowbirds and tourists who crammed themselves into planned communities and high-rise condo-hotels. The interlopers were ruining the state for the real Floridians. With the exception of Orlando, tourists and snowbirds seldom traveled inland. And if they did, almost all of them cut straight across Alligator Alley or stayed on the Turnpike. So for the time being, the middle of the state remains a predominantly feral space dominated by swampland, farmland, scrub and sinkholes. Here, there are still roads with the requisite desolation, roads where a man can just drive and think. As the Barracuda roared down the dark, empty road, Oscar thought, *thank god for desolation and an open road.*

Even after the end of Oscar's lucrative foray into the field of recreational pharmaceuticals, he had made a regular trip on these backwoods roads to visit a colleague who had covered for him and reluctantly taken up residence in the Moore Haven prison. But, there really wasn't anything in that trip for Oscar, so he decided it was pointless. *Huh, he must be out by now*, thought Oscar. *What was that guy's name again?* Oscar began rummaging through the cabinets of his memory looking for the name. He dipped his fingers into the Styrofoam cup to fish out another peanut. He never even saw the owl before it struck his windshield with a thud and startled him enough to send him careening off the road into a swampy ditch along the northbound lane. He had broadsided a mile marker post hard enough to blow out the driver's side window and spin him ass-end into the ditch. His thumb was definitely broken.

His left hand throbbed. His lap was covered in shattered glass and peanut water. "What the fuck," he muttered as he fumbled in the dark to find the overhead light. He reached across with his uninjured hand and turned the headlight toggle. A moderately effective light came on overhead. He looked down at his left hand. "Fuck," he said throwing his head back and fumbling for the cigarettes that should have been on the seat beside him. They were not there. The floorboards were slowly filling up with muddy water. "Fuck." He pushed-in the cigarette lighter and salvaged a half-smoked cigarette from the ashtray.

Oscar leaned over to open the glove box, and bits of pellet sized glass rolled off his lap; if he was lucky, there would be a flashlight in there. The glove box door fell open and a small cardboard box came tumbling out. It was a box of off-brand thirty-eight caliber bullets. The box was empty. Oscar felt inside the dark glove box and withdrew a Smith & Wesson thirty-eight. "Jesus," he whispered to himself, "a thirty-eight special." He cradled the unexpected find in his hand and a flood of memories came rushing back to him.

Oscar's father worked for the Tampa Police Department when Oscar was a kid. At that time, law enforcement still carried revolvers, and his father's service revolver had been a gun just like this one. When Oscar and his twin brother had turned twelve, his father started setting up a shooting gallery in the backyard on weekends so he could teach his boys to shoot. The neighbors would complain that it was dangerous, but whenever they called the police, it would turn into a social visit for his dad. Those were good memories.

Of course, it wasn't two years later before his father would just up and leave with some whore whose most meaningful attribute was the fact that she could suck a golf ball through a garden hose. Oscar didn't know if that was true, but it felt true. When he remembered her being a whore, *that* he knew was true. She was prostitute his father had arrested twice before falling for her and leaving. At the age of fourteen Oscar had learned a brutal lesson. When someone falls for the wrong person for the wrong reasons, it can rip apart the people they once loved. He was never going to be on the receiving side of that equation ever again. That was the event that morphed Oscar's ambition of becoming a lawman like his father into a steady decline of becoming a lawless man who didn't give a shit about anything. *What was that whore's name?* He resumed combing through the cabinets of his memory.

The cigarette lighter popped back out with a click. Oscar set the gun down on his lap and pressed the glowing coil of the lighter to the bent, half-cigarette in his mouth. He inhaled the stale smoke. He reached back in the glove box, still hoping to find a flashlight. No dice. He cradled the gun carefully in his injured left hand and opened the chamber with his right. There were two bullets in the chamber. Well, it wasn't a flashlight, but it was better than nothing.

Oscar had seen *Deliverance*. Ever since then, late night trips through the middle of nowhere always made him a little nervous. He worried that

one day he might break down and end up being told by a couple of inbred rednecks that he had a pretty mouth. He worried about it, but not enough to stop pressing his luck. Today, of all days, his luck ran out. He hadn't thought about that movie in decades. Now it was all he could think about. He snapped the chamber back in place and finished his cigarette. He was going to have to walk.

As Oscar extinguished the cigarette, he caught a glimpse of something moving on the road. He could not quite make out what it was, so he stepped on the high beam switch. What he saw was some sort of horned devil trying to crawl out of a gaping hole in the blacktop. Oscar's heart began to pound in his chest, and he struggled to catch his breath. The spinning gears in his brain finally connected and he realized what he was seeing. It was the goddamn owl that crashed into his windshield. It was not dead, but it soon would be. Bleeding badly, it thrashed and dragged its mangled body in the road. It was a great horned owl and it was huge. *I didn't realize they got that big.* He stared at the pitiful bird. Oscar briefly considered the gun in his hand. He could put the owl out of its misery, but then he would only have one bullet. He felt bad about it, but he decided nature would have to take its course.

Oscar turned the headlight toggle to cut off the overhead light then pushed it in to turn off the headlights. He left the engine running to burn off as much gasoline as possible in case the car ended up totally submerged. He knew these drainage canals fed into the Everglades and he could not stand to think about doing any more damage to that part of the Florida ecosystem. Even Oscar, an ex-coke dealer and drug smuggler who really and truly was a dick, thought the boss hogs of Big Sugar were a unique species of corrupt asshole. He'd never met any of them, but he assumed it was true because it felt that way. Yep, all they wanted to do was to rape the Everglades while giving every red-blooded American man, woman and child diabetes. He wasn't like them.

The door was smashed in with a deep gouge where he'd struck the mile marker. Oscar suspected the door would not open, but open it did and water started rushing in the car. The car was hung-up on something, so for the time being, it wasn't going to sink. Oscar contorted his bruised body to climb out of the car. He stood on the threshold and stuffed the gun in his waistband before trying to make the leap from the door to the dry bank. It was too far. He splashed down ankle-deep on the muddy embankment, slipped and landed on his injured hand. "Son of a bitch!" he shouted. He could hear the dying owl struggling to move away.

His shoes and socks were soaked. He scampered up to the black top, and retrieved his cell phone from his back pocket. He'd shut the phone off because he was avoiding a phone call. The screen had shattered during the crash, but the protective film was holding it together. He nervously turned the cell phone on, and was relieved when it came to life, twenty-two missed calls from Debbie, the owner of the Audi. His phone had a nearly full battery but no service; he expected that. He turned it back off. Cloud cover began to peel away from the moon, a waxing gibbous that steeped a weak tea of bluish-white light over the blackness of the empty road. He caught another glimpse of the suffering owl; the light patches of its feathers seemed to glow in the moonlight, as did the thick dark smears of the poor creature's blood. Oscar forced himself to look away. If memory served, there were a handful of houses along this stretch of road, he'd better get moving to put some distance between himself and the stolen car. He shook his legs to get rid of some of the water in his shoes and began to walk. Squish. Squish. Squish.

Oscar was due in Fort Lauderdale by eight in the morning to take on a fuel delivery. There was a cold front coming, and winds were going to start humping out of the north. Oscar needed to get his client's boat across the Gulf Stream and en route to Providenciales before the front churned up the stream and forced a five-day delay.

When the recreational pharmaceuticals business got to be too crowded, too dangerous, with too much risk of involuntarily taking up residence in Moore Haven, Oscar convinced himself he was too old for that particular line of work and began doing boat deliveries. Handsome and single with a penchant for parties, he made a decent living as a delivery captain and would fill in the gaps by milking wealthy divorcees for lifestyle upgrades.

Debbie would not miss the Audi; she would not report it stolen. She would write it off as a gift because she had told Oscar that she loved him. Oscar had been in a parasitic relationship with Debbie for nearly a year. She had loads of money and was always eager to see Oscar whenever he called. He'd just had two weeks with no work and spent them sponging off Debbie. Oscar was relieved when Tom called asking him to take the boat to Turks and Caicos because Debbie had started to get needy. Oscar was a taker, not a giver. With an imminent departure looming, Debbie insisted they go to Tampa to see a traveling *Cirque du Soleil* show on his last night in town. She had front row tickets and a suite reserved at Le Meridien. The original plan was to see the show and stay the night. Debbie had a driver lined-up to take Oscar to the Pier 66 marina early in the morning. Oscar reluctantly agreed to that plan, because he'd be able to sleep a few more hours on the way back.

Oscar did not care for theater or shows or whatever the hell *Cirque du Soleil* was supposed to be, but he would never say no to anything that might cut off the flow of Debbie's financially fortified affection. So they went to the show and Oscar was surprised that he genuinely enjoyed it. The entire performance was like a bizarre trip; superhuman feats of strength and flexibility artistically composed into a show that was strangely erotic. When they went back to the suite at Le Meridien, he and Debbie were both in the mood to fuck. Oscar considered himself a masculine lover, not a BDSM guy, but man who was in control. Maybe he had been a little rough, but he couldn't understand why Debbie had locked herself in the bathroom

and started crying. Debbie actually cried a lot after sex, it was a quirk of hers, but this time she wouldn't come out of the fucking bathroom. "What's the matter?" Oscar had said, sitting on the floor outside the door. "Was it me?" Because sometimes when she cried, it wasn't about him.

Oscar sat on the floor outside the bathroom listening to Debbie crying for fifteen minutes before demanding that she come out or else he would leave. She did not come out. Oscar got dressed, grabbed his wallet, his cell phone, his cigarettes and her car keys. He polished off the last of the moonshine they'd detoured to buy on the drive from Palm Beach, then he took a piss in the suite's powder room before walking out the door without saying goodbye. Debbie had become a distraction. He needed to drive. He needed to think. He needed to get out before the cold front came. He wasn't worried about Debbie. He knew he could call Debbie the next time he came through Palm Beach, and not only would she take him back with open arms, she would not mention whatever the crying had been about nor ask about the Audi. Debbie was the trifecta: rich, desperate for affection, and predictably forgiving.

Squish. Squish. Squish.

*Damn it all. Why did the idiot have to drive a Barracuda?* The Barracuda was an irresistible temptation. Other than being an unapologetic dick, Oscar considered himself a man currently on the straight and narrow. He'd grown up and shoved blatant criminal acts to the very back of his cabinet of vices. But a Barracuda is so easy to hotwire, and the idiot had left it unlocked. How was he supposed to resist? It's like he wanted someone to take it. *If I just kept on going*, Oscar scolded himself, *if I had resisted the urge to take the fucking car, I wouldn't have hit the bird. I'd be maybe an hour away from the port. I'd be looking to get a couple hours of sleep before babysitting the fuel delivery. Now...now I have to figure out how the hell I'm going to get to Fort Lauderdale by eight in the morning. Why the hell*



*did Debbie have to cry? ... Wait a second. Debbie? Was that the whore's name? Was my father's whore a Debbie too?*

Squish. Squish. Squish. Moving at a steady pace, Oscar's eyes struggled to stay adjusted to the darkness, as the cloud cover intermittently concealed then exposed the moon overhead. When the moon went behind the clouds, Oscar could barely see the road. He began following the white line of paint at the shoulder of the southbound lane to keep his bearing, and as he walked he was opening up mental cabinets again hoping to come up with the right person to call to come get him. There was no way he was going to call Debbie. Calling another lover would start a whole other chain of awkward good-byes. Who could he call who owed him a favor? Who would be awake in the middle of the night? Squish. Squish. Peter.

Peter, he was another captain who ran a towboat out of Miami. He was like a fucking vampire. *He'd be up. He'd probably be wasted, but anyone who was going to be up at two in the morning would be. Was it two in the morning?* Oscar twisted his left arm, the thumb still throbbed and burned, he could not make out the time on his watch, a gold Rolex, a gift from a different divorcee. He reached in his back pocket with his good hand and switched on his cell phone. Twenty-two missed calls from Debbie, no service, one fifty-two. *Fuck.* He switched the phone back off and waited for his eyes to readjust to the dark before he began walking again.

As dark and empty as the road was, the night was far from quiet. All around him Oscar could hear the loud woody calls of cane toads, the high-pitched chirps of tree frogs and the buzzing of all manner of insects. It had been decades since he'd been outside anywhere other than the deck of a boat or city setting. The sound of an inland Florida night was a powerful mnemonic that revived faded memories long ago buried in the clutter of Oscar's mind. The gravel on the road crunched rhythmically beneath his feet, and it reminded Oscar of a troop of soldiers marching. The memory of

playing soldier with his twin brother as a middle schooler fell into his mind.

Oscar and his twin, Steven, could not be more different and had been since they were kids. Oscar had always been really good with math and numbers. His teachers had always told him what great things he could do with his gift, but at that time, Oscar wanted to be a cop. Steven was really good at art and was never much of an athlete. He also lacked any modicum of mechanical aptitude. Oscar chuffed out loud recalling his parents' worry that Steven would never make anything out of his life if all he did was draw. Now, his brother owned one of the largest graphic design firms in Miami, and here was Oscar, walking along the shoulder of a desolate road in the middle of nowhere trying to put distance between himself and a stolen car in a ditch a few miles back. *Oh, the irony.*

As kids, he and Steven had been close despite their personality differences. They did everything together. When their dad left, they rallied around their mother until she drank herself to death their senior year of high school. They got a late start with school, so they were eighteen when she died. They stayed in the house until they graduated, sold the house, and went their separate ways. Steven finished high school and went off to college in Savannah. Oscar went in a different direction. It's not like anything major happened to drive them apart, but they did drift apart and had not bothered to contact one another for a few years now. Maybe when he got back from his delivery to Turks and Caicos he'd call Steven. He could set up a shooting gallery and they could shoot off some rounds with the thirty-eight, just like old times. He wondered if his brother still liked to shoot. Yeah, he should definitely make a point of mending that fence.

Unexpectedly, Oscar's presence startled a sleeping American bittern somewhere off in the stagnant water beside the road. It bolted into the air making a splash and shrieking its shrill aaaaah, aaaaah, aaaaah, as it flew off. The splash and shriek had scared the shit of Oscar (figuratively

anyway). He'd reflexively jammed his hand back to his waistband reaching for the gun. His hand exploded with pain and his heart was pounding in his chest. Oscar struggled to breathe. He held his hand up to his face, but it was far too dark to see it very clearly. That thumb was *definitely* broken, the only question was how badly. He tried touching it, but a jolt of pain ran through his body like electricity. "FUCK!" he shouted into the night as he doubled over with pain. Oscar tried to settle himself and catch his breath, but really wished he had that pack of smokes. The shrieking bittern had reminded him where he was. He was in the middle of the central agricultural lands in the middle of nowhere. Who knew what was out there in the dark. Fucking alligators in the water, foxes, coyotes, bears, bobcats and panthers. He'd read an article about the Florida panthers. How there weren't enough of them left to breed properly, so they were all inbred and retarded. That's all he needed, to run into a retarded panther in the dark.

Oscar blew on his hurt hand, as if that could ease some of the pain. He could hear his breath far too clearly. He realized the world around him had gone eerily silent. From the strange hush of roadway he heard a faint noise coming from behind him, it sounded heavy but soft, like a pillow being dragged on the ground. He turned and looked down the empty road. The gears in his head began spinning without the clutch again. It couldn't be. Coming down the road was the owl. Its wide yellow eyes blazed absently beneath its feathered horns as it was dragging itself down the center of the road looking desperate and pathetic. There was a long smear of blood behind it. "That's not possible," Oscar said aloud. He began walking backwards away from the crippled bird. There was no way that owl could still be alive, and Oscar had to be at least three or four miles from the crash site. "It's just not possible."

Oscar turned and began walking at a fast clip, which quickly became more of a trot. His heart was beating hard and fast enough that he could hear the blood pulsing in his ears, his lungs felt crushed by fear and his

chest heaved. Though he did not want to turn around to see if the owl was still coming down the road, he could not stop himself. He glanced nervously over his shoulder. Whee-ew, whee-ew, whee-ew, his pulse continued to throb in his ears. There was no owl in the road.

*Of course there is no owl in the road*, Oscar scolded himself. *There is no fucking owl in the road. It's just late, and my mind, my mind is playing tricks on me.* It had happened before. Several years ago, he was helping a friend bring an old Broward motor yacht back down to Florida after a summer in New England. Oscar had the dogwatch, and somewhere off the Carolinas, about fifty miles out to sea, the sun was just beginning to think about coming up on the horizon. Oscar had been staring at the gray landscape of a relaxingly calm, predawn sea when he noticed a patch of disturbed water. It began to froth and bubble and massive, long, gray tentacles started to break the surface. Whatever it was, it was monstrous and unafraid of the approaching motor yacht. Alarm had washed over Oscar like a tsunami and he was just about to call out for his crew when a curved fin broke the surface. It was nothing more than a bait ball corralled by a small pod of dolphins, but just seconds before he was convinced it was the Kraken. A fatigued mind was a dangerous instrument.

Come to think of it, he had been drinking label-less rum that trip too. Oscar had long considered himself a regular connoisseur when it came to bootleg spirits, but in retrospect, he decided he was going to swear off of it for good. There was really no need to drink moonshine. You could buy whiskey in the store, good whiskey. Whatever was in that moonshine, it was messing with his mind. He was worried about retarded panthers, then the fucking bittern nearly made him crap his pants, and his mind, his mind just went AWOL and made him see that fucking zombie owl. The self-admonition did little to settle his nerves. He noticed that the toads were still calling and the frogs were still singing and the insects were still buzzing. *There is no fucking owl coming*, he told himself again. He pictured

the owl deceased miles behind him in the middle of the road. Turkey vultures would have its corpse picked clean by the time first truck full of cabbages came rolling down the road.

Oscar's wet shoes and socks had pickled the skin on his feet, and his shoes had begun to rub raw spots on the back of both ankles. Between his throbbing hand and runaway imagination, Oscar had failed to notice the developing sores, but now his heels felt raw and bloodied. Oscar was pissed. Pissed at himself and the whole stupid-ass situation. The Barracuda wasn't even that cool of a car. It was not worth this. As Oscar followed the curve of the road, he finally saw what he was hoping for. In the distance, and a few hundred feet off the road, a sickly yellow light glowed on the front porch of a small house. "Bingo," thought Oscar aloud. He was not yet sure how he was going to get to it, but he thought for sure the house would have a landline. He forced himself to ignore the pain in his hand and feet and quickened his pace toward the porch light.

As he walked toward the dreadfully remote house, the Krakatoa-like eruption of fear triggered by the bird shrouded Oscar's delirious mind in a cloud of dread. *What kind of person chooses to live out here?* Oscar's first thought was that the house's occupant could be a deranged, skin-stealing, sociopath like Ed Gein, The Butcher of Plainfield. *This is exactly the kind of place a serial killer like that would live.* Florida hadn't had a proper serial killer since Ted Bundy, but the state had descended much deeper into its madness since Bundy. Florida was due for another. *People disappeared all the time, maybe this guy, this guy who lives out here in this fucked-up house in the middle of nowhere, maybe he waits for poor dumb assholes like me? Tortures them, steals their skin, cuts them up, then feeds them to the gators.* Oscar's synapses were firing randomly and he began thinking about *Deliverance* again. He placed a hand on the butt of the thirty-eight. He had lived a dangerous life for decades, but never actually shot anyone, never even had to shoot at anyone. *But I swear to god if some swamp*

*dwelling faggot with a secret proclivity for sodomy tells me I've got a pretty mouth, I'll fucking shoot him.* Feeling vulnerable and alone, the rapid-fire fog of fears relentlessly lingered.

By the time Oscar reached the long, gravel driveway leading to the decrepit little house, his heels were rubbed excruciatingly raw and the interruption of pain drew the door of his imagination closed. There was a weather-beaten mailbox at the head of the driveway. Oscar pulled out his cell phone and switched it on. Nearly three am, twenty-two missed calls, battery nearly full and no service. He set his screen on full bright and used it to illuminate the mailbox. The mailbox was leaning far to the left, obviously tagged by a car and apparently left that way. Oscar opened the box and found it stuffed with mail. He carefully placed the cell phone in his injured hand and began pulling mail from the box. He considered himself clever as he began looking for sportsman magazines or NRA mailings, anything that would give him an idea of what he might expect to be inside the house. Everything he pulled out of the box was addressed generically to resident; circulars from stores, solicitations from charities, invitations to test drive cars worth more than the crappy house, AARP special offers, there were no bills or official mailings of any kind. It struck Oscar as odd. There was also no indication that he would encounter a radical, doomsday gun nut. Relieved by the absence of atypical mail, Oscar surmised that a senior citizen would occupy the house, and he'd be correct in that assumption.