

Peter Stenson

FIFTEEN



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About the Book

When Chase sees the little girl in umbrella socks savaging the Rottweiler, he's not too concerned. As someone who's been smoking meth every day for as long as he can remember, he's no stranger to such horrifying, drug-fuelled hallucinations. But, as he and his fellow junkies discover, the little girl is no illusion. The end of the world really has arrived. And with Chase's life already destroyed beyond all hope of redemption, Armageddon might actually be an opportunity – a last chance to hit restart and become the person he once dreamed of being. Soon Chase is fighting to reconnect with his lost love and dreaming of becoming her hero among the ruins. But is salvation just another pipe dream?

Propelled by a blistering first-person voice and featuring a powerfully compelling anti-hero, *Fiend* is at once a brilliant portrait of addiction, a pitch-black comedy, and the darkest, most twisted love story you've ever read – not to mention one hell of a zombie novel.

About the Author

Peter Stenson received his MFA from Colorado State University in 2012. His stories and essays have been published in *The Sun*, *The Bellevue Literary Review*, *The Greensboro Review* and elsewhere. He lives with his wife and daughter in Denver.

FIEND

A NOVEL

PETER STENSON



WILLIAM HEINEMANN: LONDON

To anybody who has helped me with anything

MONDAY

8:54 AM

So Typewriter John and I have spent the last hour lying to each other, faking concern, panic, and desperation, all the while helping the other look for the last hit. The thing is, we each know the other is holding on to an eraser-sized shard. It's like a standoff, both of us wanting to be left the fuck alone for five minutes. Finally Typewriter caves, says he's going to take a shit, which I know isn't true because we haven't eaten in close to three days.

I pull out the tiny bit of glass. Burn it. And it's barely two hits and I'm spun bad, like from our weeklong bender, but this one really does it, because when I peek through the G.I. Joe sheets we've draped over the windows, I see a little girl playing with a dog. I'm thinking this is kind of sweet—this blond child crouching on all fours, inching closer to the dog, like maybe she's playing a game of make-believe where she's a dog too. But then I notice the dog is shaking. And it's a big dog, a rottweiler, and he's shaking, his head down, his tail covering his nuts.

What the fuck?

I'm about to return back to our cave of a world because the sun is ungodly bright, but I see the dog take a snap at the little girl. She dodges him just in time. I think about pounding on the glass. I need to warn this kid. I need to do *something*.

But I don't.

I stand there. The little girl creeps back to the dog, and once she gets close enough to touch it, she does, only her touch isn't a pat but a lunge for the rottweiler's throat. It

reminds me of this time I saw an elderly woman crossing the street, she almost made it across when a black Hummer turned right and came straight at her not slowing, and the old woman looked up in time to see her fate as an extravagant flaunting of male testosterone, and she crumpled, lost underneath tons of metal.

The little blond girl rips open the dog's throat.

I rub my eyes.

Blood spouting like Old Faithful. Her white dress now tie-dyed, swatches of brilliant red on cotton.

I close the G.I. Joe sheets. I sit down.

I'm telling myself that it's gone too far this time, this latest run, smoking half an ounce of scante, that I need to chill the fuck out, like KK said. I tell myself that this is it. That I will leave this house on the outskirts of St. Paul, go find something to eat, take a handful of Advil PMs, and call it a day. Call it a career in smoking speed. Never have I experienced such vivid hallucinations. Sure, tracers and voices and shit like that, but not seeing carnage on this scale. I laugh to myself. I try to analyze my hallucination—the little girl represents innocence, and it's probably significant that she's blond, because KK's blond, and that ties into innocence, because we were close to that, her and I, at least in the beginning. And the dog, maybe that's man's best friend, maybe it's the natural world, maybe primal nature. And the subversion of the natural order, the child killing the dog, that's pretty simple—innocence wins out.

EVERY fucking epiphany and realization and coded message all tell me the same thing: I need to get clean.

I'm rubbing my hair. It's greasy like a motherfucker. I smell my breath. It's like abortions. Then I look around Typewriter's house and it's disgusting, that eerie shade of manufactured darkness, the sun doing its damndest

against the strung-up sheets to tell us the world is still going about its boring-ass business. I'm on the one couch left over from his mother, the only thing he hasn't pawned. I hate my life. I think about Typewriter smoking shit in the bathroom. Maybe he has more than a shard? I stand up because I could really go for one last hit, a nightcap.

Something tells me to take one more peek outside. I'm nearly positive the blond apparition will be gone, a fire hydrant standing in her place. I peek. She's still there and her dress isn't a Jackson Pollock anymore, just red. So's her hair.

Typewriter, I yell.

Innocence has her face buried in the dog's stomach. She pulls at the intestines like saltwater taffy.

Type, I yell again.

Shitting, bro, he calls back.

I'm practically chewing on my overworked heart when the girl turns. She stares right at me, her face nothing but canine blood, a piece of matted fur dangling from her jaw.

Need you right fucking now, I say.

I close my eyes, rub them, breathe, just breathe—one one thousand, two one thousand—and when I look back out, the little girl's standing, dripping guts, still staring at me.

Shit, man, I yell at the bathroom door, I found half an eight ball.

This gets his attention. I hear him rushing through the house. He comes jogging into the TV room (minus the TV, sold six months before). I stare at his fat Italian face, his eyebrows a launch ramp over his nose. He says, Fucking A, bro, let's get it.

I've smoked enough meth in my life to know the power of suggestion among the tweaked is realer than AIDS, so I don't tell him about what may or may not be going on outside. I pull the curtain back.

Bro, the dope, let's see it.

I step to the side. I motion with my head.

Typewriter John stares at me, his chubby body all sorts of impatient.

I nod again at the window.

He looks outside. He screams. He drops to the floor. He's saying *fuck, fuck, fuck*. I take one final peek, and Innocence is standing two feet from the window, bloody like the First World War, and before I can scream and close the drapes, I take one solid look, like really study her. Pieces of her flesh peel off her face like thin slices of gyro meat.

I'm on the floor.

Typewriter continues his refrain of *fucks* and I still am not one hundred percent sure of the situation so I say, What did you see?

What the fuck?

Type, I need to know what—

Blood. Girl. Monster.

He's crying. I wonder why I'm not. I tell him to follow me, that we need to get the fuck away from the window. I lead on my stomach. We make our way to the staircase, my heart is sixteenth notes, I'm still telling myself it's a lack of sleep and bowl upon bowl of meth, and I look over my shoulder past the whimpering snot that is Typewriter to the window, and I can see a three-foot silhouette through the thin bedsheet. Then I hear a crash, and the sheet moves, and this isn't fucking happening.

Go, go, go, I yell.

He's on his feet and running up the stairs and I watch the blond girl climb through the window and sit on the sofa like nothing happened, maybe she's just returning from eating a handful of potato chips off the coffee table. I can see bone underneath the peeling flesh. It's whiter than I would have guessed.

Chase, Chase.

I turn to see Typewriter at the top of the stairs and then look back to the girl sitting there like a used tampon. She smiles at me, starts to giggle. I sprint upstairs.

We get into Typewriter's room and lock the door. He bends over a stack of spread vaginas in glossy pages, and I want to be like, What the fuck are you doing, but he starts to vomit. I tell him we're fine. That the dope must have been bad. That it was nothing.

We hear footsteps, slow and methodical.

I say that we need some benzos or opiates or barbiturates, something to come the fuck down.

He's expelling bile with the force of a capped volcano.

And I say that these things happen, audio and visual hallucinations, that the shit from the Albino was always strongest, and we've been at it hard, and we're probably dehydrated, and starving, yeah, starving. The footsteps seem to be getting closer, and I'm staring at the chrome door handle, and I'm telling Type that we just need to think about something else, anything else, something happy. Okay, Type, think about something happy, peaceful, and shit. And it's more vomit from him and I'm shaking and the door handle starts to jiggle and I'm like, Happy thoughts, man. Then for some reason I remember one of KK and my first dates two years before, how we'd gone to see *Spider-Man 2*, how we'd waited for the 16 bus, neither of us having cars because we'd fucked up our lives smoking shit, but we were getting better, together, living in sober houses and going to meetings, and how she was the first girl I'd ever thought of in terms other than a means to an orgasm, how we'd just sat there, throwing rocks from the faux garden in front of KFC at a metal trash can, how that was the only thing I wanted to be doing at that very moment.

The little girl starts pounding on the door. I know it won't take long. The door's not actual wood, this being a prefabricated suburban house and all. The next tiny fist splinters the frame. I wish we were the kind of drug addicts from movies, the kind with guns. I keep telling myself I'm spun. Her one hand becomes two. And it's me and KK sitting along Ford Parkway, waiting for the 16, debating the

merits of *Spider-Man* vs. *Spider-Man 2*, our pinkies touching, grazing.

The middle of the door cracks open and I'm screaming at this hallucination, screaming because I'm going to be dead at twenty-five, dead without having accomplished one fucking thing in my life, having burnt every fucking bridge worth having, my primary relationship now being with a junkie called Typewriter, and I think how everyone who'd ever said they loved me had told me this would be my fate—drugs would eventually kill me.

The door's off its hinges and this little girl is smiling at us with blood and flesh and dog fur. All I can do is close my eyes and listen to her labored breathing and giggles, her cute fucking giggles. Then I hear the bedsprings to my right. I look over. Typewriter jumps off the bed with something raised above his head and by the time I realize it's his actual fucking typewriter, by the time I scream *no*, it's too late. He's brought it down onto the little girl's head. She falls limp on the floor. I'm covered in bits of skull.

Typewriter looks at me. He says, I did it.

No, fuck, no, Jesus.

I did it, he says again.

Fuck me, Jesus, what the fuck?

Typewriter spits, then rubs his tongue like he's trying to snag a pubic hair.

I'm picturing the headlines—JUNKIES BRUTALLY MURDER PRETEEN IN DRUG-INDUCED PARANOIA. I'm picturing the press and TruTV and *True Crime* reenactments and then an MSNBC *Lockup* special edition and then prison and getting my young ass blown the fuck apart and this is the last image because this will be my life.

I did it, he says again.

I look at the little girl. She's wearing black shoes with tiny silver clasps. Her socks have printed umbrellas and raindrops on them.

Think, think, think.

I'll flip. I'll tell the authorities it was Typewriter. He was the one who killed the little girl. They'll make me some sort of deal for my cooperation. And I can give them the Albino, the biggest cook in Minnesota. Yeah. They'll put me in witness protection and move me to Spokane or somewhere, someplace I can get a job pouring foundations or flipping burgers, and it'll be okay.

I take a step back from the girl. Type kicks the actual typewriter off the kid's face. There's nothing left. It's my turn to vomit.

I think about all the things I've touched in the house, my DNA or whatever on every surface. I think about no jury believing me. I think about terms I've heard on TV, *conspiracy* and *accomplice*. There's no way I'll get a fucking deal. They'll want to make a case out of both of us. They'll use this murder to champion their antimeth campaign, and instead of the commercials of kids with picked faces it'll be a black and white of this little girl, maybe one from her third-grade class, then a picture of the crime scene, then my mug shot. I'm fucked. I'm going to die in prison.

What do we do now? Typewriter asks.

You fucking killed her, I say.

Yeah, somebody had to.

I grab his T-shirt around the armpits. I shove him hard against the wall. She was a little girl, I yell.

No.

Look.

She was going to kill us.

A hallucination. A fucking hallucination.

Typewriter looks at the mess on the floor. He's shaking his head and I push him again and then his shaking changes direction. He crumples onto his bed. He says, But the door?

Part of the trip.

We're silent. What is there really to say? *Shit, my bad?* I think about calling the cops, maybe the volunteering of information might look good. I pull out my phone.

What are you doing? Typewriter asks.

I don't know, I say.

No, no, stop.

I stop. My phone's dead anyway.

We can take care of this. Like, we can fix this, he says.

We can't.

Yes, bro, like we'll clean it up ... and ... and ... like leave town, you know, like Mexico. We'll go to Mexico. Live on the beach. Fake names and shit.

I quit listening. I'm remembering terms like *temporary insanity* and *unfit for trial*.

Typewriter keeps telling me there's no fucking way he's going back to prison.

I need to think. To clear my head. To not be high. The room is starting to smell like my father's halitosis. All I see is blood. And her socks. I'm picturing the little girl's mother coming into her room, maybe suggesting a different pair because it's so sunny, the little girl sticking out her tongue, telling her no, these are my favorite. By now the mother is probably wondering where her daughter is. Maybe it's time for lunch? Maybe she's out on the driveway, in front of a two-car garage, her hand shielding the sun, calling her name, her tone playful at first, now becoming frantic.

I smell booze. Typewriter is pouring a liter of vodka onto his sheets.

What the fuck are you—I start to say. I realize what he's doing before I finish. I want to tell him no, this is a horrible idea. The cops aren't fucking stupid and they'll catch us and this is only going to make things worse. But then I think that it doesn't matter if we tell them or not, we'll be guilty as Arabs at airports. The rest of my life will be spent getting one in the stink, one in the mouth, on a rotating basis.

And part of me knows this is one of those moments after which nothing will ever be the same. Like out-of-body or whatever-the-fuck. Like when you can see yourself crystal fucking clear. When you know one choice will result in hooded sweatshirts and downcast eyes and running from every set of flashing cherries and how your habit will take on astronomical fury because it needs to kill out the memory of who you were. The other choice will mean being turned into a monster, having every person in America hate you, think you're evil, and death by anal fissure in prison.

I've had this feeling once before—the watching-yourself-fuck-up-your-life moment. It was with KK. We'd decided enough was enough with powerlessness and unmanageability and prayers to a god we knew didn't exist. We bought a teener. We somehow waited until we got back to our apartment. We sat on our bed. Her pale legs looked blotchy against our blue down comforter, one we'd bought together at Target. We told each other it would only be this once. We said it was a special occasion. We said we'd only smoke it. We said I love you, smoke slipping from our lips.

You have a lighter? Typewriter asks.

I watch myself reach into the pocket of my jeans. I watch myself hand over the red Bic and then study the flames along the soiled sheets, amazed at how quickly they grow.

I wonder if this—the murder, the burning of the house—isn't just a continuation of my relapse with KK.

The posters of DJs catch on fire. Then the mattress. Smoke rises. Typewriter motions for the door, or where it used to be. We jog down the stairs, and then into the basement. I climb in his ancient Civic. He opens the garage door. The sun is absolutely fucking blinding and we pull out into a neighborhood that doesn't know we exist. I'm looking for the girl's mom and praying I don't see her. I glance back at the house. The faintest plumes of smoke slip out from the upstairs window. As we're driving away, something in

the front yard catches my eye. I press my face against the window. It's the carcass of a rottweiler.

10:15 AM

We drive down Summit Avenue. The houses are nice and then they're not. I tell Typewriter to go five under the whole way. He tells me there aren't any cars anyway. I haven't noticed. But then I do. I look around Summit. It's just Victorian mansions with rows of evergreens like please stay the fuck away, cars parked in driveways, empty streets.

I'm so spun.

I look at the dashboard clock. It's a quarter past ten. Maybe everyone's already at work? We're down Summit Hill and onto West Seventh. This is my stomping ground. Has been for a year. Strip malls with laundromats and apartments above Chinese takeouts and narrow barrooms filled with smoke and televisions, none of them flat screens. I know what this area's supposed to look like. Busy with people standing at bus stops and girls standing on corners and brothers spitting balloons of dope out of their mouths. But it's not. It's empty.

I ask Typewriter if it's a holiday or something. He doesn't know. I check my shirt to see if it's still covered in blood. It is. I flick off a nugget of skull. It sticks to the dash. Nothing makes sense. I keep telling myself I've spent the last hundred and sixty-eight hours smoking meth, that I'm beyond delusional, beyond sane, one more awake hour away from completely breaking the fuck down.

We turn onto Marshall. I see my boy Tibbs walking down Seventh. This makes me feel better. Like things are normal, okay. Type says, Bet Tibbs is holding, could hook it up with a teener for the road.

Not trying to flee yet, I say.

Huh?

Get to my apartment. Got a few Klonopin. I need to sleep, man, like my head is bad.

Feel you, Typewriter says.

We pull over at my sublet. I get out. Stretch. I wonder where the hell everyone is. Nobody's waiting for the bus, nobody's driving or honking, there's no foot traffic over at the Groveland Tap. Typewriter scans the streets too. He looks at me. I shrug.

We go around back of the split-level and it's nothing but red chipped paint and cracked sidewalks but Rebecca gave me the tiny-ass apartment for three fifty a month, so whatever. I open the door. The house splits inside the tiny foyer, one door to the two upstairs units, one door to my dungeon of an efficiency basement. The mildew stench from the walls is at an all-time bad. I think about complaining to Rebecca but decide against it, having smoked July's rent.

It's a strange feeling inside my apartment—part relief, part dread—and I wonder if that's what everyone feels coming home. Like, yeah, I see the one piece of furniture I own, my mattress covered in unwashed navy blue sheets, and I'm like, motherfucker, I missed you. But I see nothing but dust bunnies on the scratched wooden floors—and I'm like, motherfucker, this is it. This is my life.

What's up with those benzos? Typewriter asks.

I walk to the bathroom next to the efficiency kitchen. It doesn't have a door. I open the tiny medicine cabinet. A toothbrush that has gone unused for weeks sits next to an Advil bottle. I pour out its contents—four beautiful Klonopin. I think about swallowing them all, the four of them spreading through me like the warmest of quilts on a January night. I run the faucet. I want to sleep and forget what happened with the umbrella-socked demon. I glance up. Something is staring back at me. I nearly scream. It's me. My eyes are the deepest of oceanic trenches.

Give it here, Type says.

I hand him two pills and swallow mine.

I think about how much time I spend trying to find a balance between artificial moods, the equilibrium of acceleration and deceleration.

I plug my cell phone into the charger. Typewriter lies on my bed.

Get the fuck out, I say.

Bro, where am I—

Not on my bed.

But there's no other furniture.

Sorry, not all of us have a house from our mom.

Typewriter looks at me like I've spit in his mouth. I feel like a dick. I say, Listen, man, I'm sorry. We need to sleep and figure out what the fuck happened, you know, like what's real, what isn't.

He starts to get off the mattress. I tell him it's fine, just don't try any faggy shit. He calls me a faggot. I tell him that was a good comeback. I lie there and my heart still thunders and I'm willing the soluble shell of the Klonopin to break open and spill its contents into my bloodstream, for my eyes to become heavy. Typewriter curls at the foot of the bed like a wary dog. This reminds me of the rottweiler. The little girl. The giggles. The little fist coming through the door. The typewriter. The flames. I picture the police there, the fire department too, Typewriter's childhood house alive in its death, flames reaching toward the telephone poles, the electric wires connecting everything. I should call KK. Tell her I might be going away for a while. How long until they come looking for Typewriter here? I strain my ears to hear Rebecca's TV through the floorboards. I can't hear anything. This is odd. That fat bitch has that thing blaring at all hours of the day. I yawn, and this makes me smile. They're working, the Klonopin. I know that when I wake up, I'll be terrified, either because of what we've done, or because of what drugs are turning me into.

7:51 PM

I wake up, not ready to. Typewriter slaps at my feet.

What?

It was real, he says.

Huh?

He points to his shirt. It's still covered in blood. I look down at myself and see the same thing and I'm thinking, fuck my ass, what did we do? I rip off my T-shirt and throw it on the floor. I look at my pants. Smears of the little girl stain the denim.

Bro, Type says.

We need to get out of the bloody clothes. Burn 'em or some shit, I say.

He understands then, stripping down.

There's a pile of clothes in the corner, all dirty. I pull out a white T-shirt and a pair of green sweatpants and toss them to Typewriter. I dress in jeans and a navy blue shirt, musty with cooled sweat.

Then I'm packing what little I have in a trash bag. I stuff in some clothes, my phone charger, a jacket. I'm thinking about passports, about money, about Mexico or Canada, my parents, KK, about not using the one credit card I still have because they can track those things, about maybe ditching Typewriter because one person disappearing is easier than two. I pack my toothbrush, my unopened mail. Typewriter stands at the one excuse for a window, looking up through the basement metal grate. I feel a slight craving, just a hit to get my head straight. I wonder if Typewriter still has a shard. I ask. He doesn't respond.

Yes or no?

He shakes his head.

What the fuck does that mean?

Still nothing and I want to bash his head in because he can be such an idiot. So helpless. So desperate. Playing the whole poor-fucking-me-my-mom-died-of-cancer junkie

thing. And he's shady as hell. Always stealing people's scraps, shorting bags. And here he is, facing murder, staring out my piss slit of a window like he can't get enough of the sunset.

You gonna help? I ask.

Something's not right.

I laugh. You kidding me right now?

Look, he says.

I decide right then and there to leave him. I'll be better off without his constant bitching, his tendency to destroy everything he touches.

Help me pack up the bloody clothes.

Chase, look.

I'll humor him until we get out of the city, until we stop for gas. I'll leave him while he's paying.

I walk over to the window and look up to the street level. There's nothing. I ask him what he's talking about. He points. I say, Yeah, so?

Nothing, he says.

That's a good thing.

Not one person. Nobody. When's the last time you saw Seventh empty?

We don't have time for this, I say.

Serious. When? Never, bro.

I look back out. I half expect to see the little girl with umbrella socks and flakes of missing face. He's right. There's nobody walking around and I want to tell him that it's probably because people are at work or maybe the Twins are playing, but even as I formulate these objections, I'm countering them—nobody works banker hours on West Seventh, not one pregnant teen is waiting at the bus stop, I can't hear the motor of a single car—and I realize that something *is* wrong.

I tell Type to go check it out.

Not going out there.

Then pack this shit up while I do it.

He tells me no. He picks at the constant scab on the left side of his jaw. He whispers something. All I catch is *apocalypse*.

Just stay here, okay? Pack up those bloody clothes so we can get the fuck gone.

Chase.

Do it.

He nods. I walk outside. At this point, I'm still hoping it's the drugs, maybe the Albino's latest batch was cut with a PCP derivative, that we're spun. I stand on the sidewalk and see not one person on the street. The Groveland Tap is empty. No cars. I walk around to the front of Seventh. I'm starting to shiver because it's like that dream when you're walking alone and you finally realize it—your solitary venture through this life—and skyscrapers are covered in vines and the road is buckled open like a whore's gap and it's just you and your stupid footsteps, the sound of your rubber soles dragging on aged asphalt.

I'm thinking about a conversation with KK, back when we were sober, in love with second chances and each other's naked flesh. She'd asked, if I was offered the gift of immortality, would I take it? I'd kissed her German triangle of a nose, said something cheesy about *only with you*. She'd said, No, that's not what I mean. Everyone you know will be dead but you. Would you do it? I'd thought about it, KK straddling me, my dick starting to harden, my lips brushing against her self-proclaimed biggest embarrassment, her nose, wondering if my breath was foul. I'd said, Yeah, I would.

I stand there, feeling my sanity stretch to its limits, thinking about KK fucking that scumbag Jared, that stupid fucking prick.

I take another look toward downtown St. Paul. Lights are on in the modest skyscrapers. I hear birds. The sun shines but just a little. There's a slight wind coming from the Mississippi. Are Tibbs, Type, and myself the only people to

survive Armageddon? I laugh. I realize it makes more sense that I'm really sitting on Typewriter's couch, the glass pipe in my lap, my heart having finally quit.

I walk back to the apartment. Typewriter's still standing by the window. I tell him I'm going to go see if fat Rebecca can tell me what's going on. He says he'll come too and I want to tell him that isn't smart, but he's practically crying so I say, Let's go.

At the top of the landing I knock on her door. I wet my lips and try to do something with my hair. No answer. I knock again.

Everyone's gone, Typewriter says behind me.

She never leaves. Even gets her groceries delivered, I say.

I press my ear to the door, expecting to hear the shuffling of slippers.

Fuckin' stinks, Typewriter says.

The mildew in the walls, I say.

I knock one more time. Then I test the handle. It turns. I open the door a foot and call her. I step in and the smell is horrific, like rotting pot roast. I pull my shirt over my mouth and nose. Her apartment looks just like always—a couch and recliner centered on a TV, the kitchen full of take-out Chinese boxes, everything dirty as fuck.

We should go, Typewriter says.

I walk into the main room and feel the TV. It's cold. She has that thing running twenty-four-seven. I push Power. The screen fills with static that bathes the evening room with white light.

Something crashes in the bedroom.

I stiffen. Typewriter runs for the door and I flash on what the little girl did to the dog and think about whatever is in the next room doing that to me. I see a streak of black. A cat freezes in the doorway, staring at us. It runs back to the bedroom. I follow. I'm cautious, I know whatever I see will be bad, and Typewriter is behind me, which I'm glad about.

The bedroom door is open a slit.

I nod to Typewriter. He nods back. I push open the door. All three hundred pounds of Rebecca is splayed out on her bed. Her slew of cats look over at me, their mouths covered in blood and flesh.

Jesus Christ, I say. I turn back to the hallway.

What? Typewriter says. He looks inside. He says, Fucking shit, man, they're eating her. The cats are fucking eating her.

I want to cry. To throw up. To go back to Typewriter's house and have my only concern be trying to find a minute alone to smoke a dime piece.

Let's get gone, Typewriter says.

I follow him to the door. One of the cats stares at us like we'd just interrupted something sacred. It keeps licking its bloodied whiskers. I'm beginning to grasp the reality of our situation and I just need some sort of confirmation. I need somebody to tell me this is real. That everyone I've ever known has died or disappeared somehow. That we did, in fact, crush the skull of some possessed child. That it was okay because we had no choice.

I knock on the door to Svetlana's, the Russian tenant.

Bro, let's get ghost, Type says.

She's got Internet. Just need to see what the fuck is going on.

She's gonna be dead.

The door is locked. I kick the shit out of it. The wood splinters on the first kick. We go in. It's the same smell and we both pull our shirts over our faces and I walk over to her computer. An old Soviet flag hangs on the wall. I sit on a ratty brown couch, right next to about seven dildos, a bottle of lube, and a butt plug thicker than a baseball bat.

Typewriter gives a chuckle. He says, Bitch be loving dick, huh?

Did those webcam shows, I say.

He's holding the black butt plug. He gives it a tentative sniff. I think about telling him to grow up. He's smiling though. I sit and get the computer going. The shit takes forever to get warmed up.

You ever hit it? Typewriter asks.

I shake my head.

Bullshit, some Russian debutante sitting up here all day fiddling her pussy, and you never hit it?

Windows loads. I don't tell Typewriter I can't remember the last time I'd been sober enough to get a hard dick. I click on Internet Explorer. He's on to the dildos now, holding them up to one another, maybe mentally comparing where he would stack up in the equation.

Finally, the Internet is up and I'm at her home page, 18 to play.com, and I see my face streaming on the screen. I really do look like hell, nothing but scruff and scabs and eyes sunken like the *Titanic*.

You streaming? Typewriter asks.

Yeah, guess so.

I move the cursor to click to a news site.

Hold on, he says. He sits next to me, giving me a shove. His face streams online. He's the only fat meth addict ever. His cheeks take up the whole screen.

He says, Is anybody out there? Anyone? Is there any single motherfucker left alive in this world?

Stop, I say.

Type keeps going, overenunciating like he's talking to a retarded kid, We are in St. Paul, Minnesota. There is nobody left. Maybe some little girl but she was—

Fucking stop, I yell. I push him out of the way. You stupid?

Typewriter balls a fist. Part of me hopes he swings, hopes this can be the logical end to our relationship. He relaxes his hand. He says, There's got to be somebody out—

A chime comes from the computer. I look at the screen.