

BEWARE THE BANDAGE MAN:

PART II

A NORTH COAST HORROR STORY

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FOR COAST WEEKEND

It was Saturday, October 20, 1973. Ben Driscoll woke up that morning with a pinch. He had slept hard, drooling on his pillow and flinging one arm off the side of the bed. When he shot awake he found a Dungeness crab clamping the pink meat of his wrist.

"What the hell?" he said, shaking the crustacean loose.

He collected 11 free-range crabs from around the cottage and put them into the kitchen sink as the kids slept. Sultan was nowhere to be found. The skulls were gone, too. The front door had blown wide open during the night, but this kind of thing didn't just happen.

There was only one man who could be responsible for this.

Ben knocked on Earl Sloane's door, seething, a Dungeness in hand. After a few long minutes, Earl opened the door, still crutched against the shotgun.

"Pete," he said. "Wasn't sure if I would see you again." Earl looked at the crab in his hand. "Gift?"

"What is this?" Ben said, raising the crab. "Do you think this is funny?"

"No," Earl said plainly. "I think that is delicious."

"Look, I don't know what you're playing at, old man," Ben said. "But leave me and my family alone. And where's my dog?"

"Haven't seen him."

"If I hear one bark from this direction ... " Ben wagged a shaky finger at Earl's chest. "One bark, and I'll—"

Earl's face drained of any friendly pretense until it set in a hard scowl. "You'll what?"

"Just wait," Ben said, backing up on the porch. He chucked the crab at the doormat. "Just wait."

As Ben began to walk away, Earl called from the door, "Pete! I tried to level with you!"

"Oh yeah," Ben said without turning around. "Your dead son. Right!"

"He's always looking for a ride home!"

When he returned to the Surf's End



House, the kids were awake.

"When did you get home last night?" he asked Audrey.

"What's with the crabs?" she replied.

"Tonight we eat like kings."

"I'm going out tonight," she said.

"Suzy A. might be in love."

"Where's Sultan?" Sam asked.

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What kind of cruel world would take a boy's mother and dog in the same year? Ben asked the cloudy sky, but received no answer. He was beginning to lose Audrey, too, but fathers spend years preparing to lose their 16-year-old daughters.

They combed the neighborhood, but the mutt never turned up. Night

came early as the rains blotted the sun and stirred a heavy wind that rattled every branch, bush and beam. The squalls didn't stop Audrey from going out when a cherry-red Chevy pickup emerged out front.

Sam stared at the crab on his plate, his one good eye rubbed raw by tissues. He had barely even given its claw a handshake. Ben couldn't be sure the crab he was eating was the one that had bit him this morning, but he took a satisfaction in imagining that it was every time he snapped shell to reveal a lump of sweet meat. Wouldn't life be easier if you could douse all of your enemies in melted butter?

"It's so cold out there," Sam said. "I bet he's really scared."

"You need to eat, buddy," Ben said. "Keep your strength up. We'll find him

in the morning." But thinking about those posters they had seen downtown, Ben wasn't so sure.

After he cleaned up the kitchen, set the rest of the crabs to the wild, and got Sam to bed in flannel pajamas, Ben poured four fingers of bourbon and plotted at a ghostly face built of three dark knobs glazed into the knotty pine. He was one hundred percent Earl Sloane had his hands on this. He has another key — it's that simple. Ben's grip tightened around his glass as he imagined that old kook limping down this dark hallway as he snored, as his son, as his daughter ... No, don't even go there. Stay focused. Perhaps he could return the favor? He could just peek in through one of Sloane's windows. Once he saw Sultan in the house, he could ... do what exactly? He'd squeezed himself into a position where he couldn't call the police. What would he do next?

Rain spat against the windows. The downpour gushed enough to dim the orange throb of light that winked across the sky and also hid the bulky shadow that appeared outside the window. When it spanked the double pane with its bandaged palm, bourbon snuck through Ben's nose as he let the glass slip, shattering on the floor. He knocked over his chair as he stood. The creature rubbed its palm across the glass, staining the window with its dark grease as its breath birthed little cumulus clouds. *It was breathing.* For a moment, Ben caught his own reflection in the window, his face transposed upon the near-featureless gauze of the creature's bandaged head.

Then they both looked to the front door.

"Sam!" Ben yelled.

He ran across the room and made it to the lock.

"Sam! Get up now!"

He flipped the table over and butted it against the door just as the knob began to spasm and the soggy smacks of the creature's fists shook the wood in its frame.

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