



Jangal Publication



STEPHEN  
KING

THE OUTSIDER

A NOVEL

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*For Rand and Judy Holston*

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Thought only gives the world an appearance of order to anyone weak enough to be convinced by its show.

Colin Wilson

“The Country of the Blind”

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# THE OUTSIDER

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# THE ARREST

July 14th

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It was an unmarked car, just some nondescript American sedan a few years old, but the blackwall tires and the three men inside gave it away for what it was. The two in front were wearing blue uniforms. The one in back was wearing a suit, and he was as big as a house. A pair of black boys standing on the sidewalk, one with a foot on a scuffed orange skateboard, the other with a lime-colored board under his arm, watched it turn into the parking lot of the Estelle Barga Recreational Park, then looked at each other.

One said, "That's Five-O."

The other said, "No shit."

They headed off with no further conversation, pumping their boards. The rule was simple: when Five-O shows up, it's time to go. Black lives matter, their parents had instructed them, but not always to Five-O. At the baseball field, the crowd began to cheer and clap rhythmically as the Flint City Golden Dragons came to bat in the bottom of the ninth, one run down.

The boys didn't look back.

*Statement of Mr. Jonathan Ritz (July 10th, 9:30 PM, interviewed by Detective Ralph Anderson)*

**Detective Anderson:** I know you're upset, Mr. Ritz,

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it's understandable, but I need to know exactly what you saw earlier this evening.

Ritz: I'll never get it out of my mind. Never. I think I could use a pill. Maybe a Valium. I've never taken any of that stuff, but I sure could use something now. My heart still feels like it's in my throat. Your forensic people should know that if they find puke at the scene, and I guess they will, it's mine. I'm not ashamed, either. Anyone would have lost their supper if they saw something like that.

Detective Anderson: I'm sure a doctor will prescribe something to calm you down when we're done. I think I can arrange for that, but right now I need you clearheaded. You understand that, don't you?

Ritz: Yes. Of course.

Detective Anderson: Just tell me everything you saw, and we'll be finished for this evening. Can you do that for me, sir?

Ritz: All right. I went out to walk Dave right around six o'clock this evening. Dave is our beagle. He has his evening meal at five. My wife and I eat at five thirty. By six, Dave is ready to take care of his business—Number One and Number Two, I mean. I walk him while Sandy—my wife—does up the dishes. It's a fair division of labor. A fair division of labor is very important in a marriage, especially after the children have grown up, that's the way we look at it. I'm rambling, aren't I?

Detective Anderson: That's okay, Mr. Ritz. Tell it your way.

Ritz: Oh, please call me Jon. I can't stand Mr. Ritz. Makes me feel like a cracker. That's what the kids called me when I was in school, Ritz Cracker.

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Detective Anderson: Uh-huh. So you were walking your dog—

Ritz: That's right. And when he got a strong scent—the scent of death, I suppose—I had to hold him back on his leash with both hands, even though Dave's just a little dog. He wanted to get at what he was smelling. The—

Detective Anderson: Wait, let's go back. You left your house at 249 Mulberry Avenue at six o'clock—

Ritz: It might have been a little before. Dave and I walked down the hill to Gerald's, that grocery on the corner where they sell all the gourmet stuff, then up Barnum Street, and then into Figgis Park. That's the one the kids call Frig Us Park. They think adults don't know what they say, that we don't listen, but we do. At least some of us do.

Detective Anderson: Was this your usual evening walk?

Ritz: Oh, sometimes we change it up a little so we don't get bored, but the park is where we almost always end up before heading home, because there's always lots for Dave to smell. There's a parking lot, but at that time of the evening it's almost always empty, unless there are some high school kids playing tennis. There weren't any that night, because the courts are clay and it rained earlier. The only thing parked there was a white van.

Detective Anderson: A commercial van, would you say?

Ritz: That's right. No windows, just double doors in the back. The kind of van small companies use to haul stuff in. It might have been an Econoline, but I couldn't swear to that.

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Detective Anderson: Was there a company name written on it? Like Sam's Air Conditioning or Bob's Custom Windows? Something like that?

Ritz: No, uh-uh. Nothing at all. It was dirty, though, I can tell you that. Hadn't been washed in some time. And there was mud on the tires, probably from the rain. Dave sniffed at the tires, then we went along one of the gravel paths through the trees. After about a quarter of a mile, Dave started to bark and ran into the bushes on the right. That's when he got that scent. He almost dragged the leash out of my hand. I tried to pull him back and he wouldn't come, just flopped over and dug at the ground with his paws and kept on barking. So I snubbed him up close—I have one of those retractable leashes, and it's very good for that kind of thing—and went after him. He doesn't bother about squirrels and chipmunks so much now that he's not a puppy anymore, but I thought he might have scented up a raccoon. I was going to make him come back whether he wanted to or not, dogs need to know who's boss, only that was when I saw the first few drops of blood. They were on a birch leaf, about chest-high to me, which would make it I guess five feet or so off the ground. There was another drop on another leaf a little further on, then a whole splash of it on some bushes further on still. Still red and wet. Dave sniffed at that one, but wanted to keep going. And listen, before I forget, right about then I heard an engine start up behind me. I might not have noticed, except it was pretty loud. ~~when I heard an engine start up behind me. I~~ might not have noticed, except it was pretty loud, like the muffler was shot. Kind of rumbling, do you know what I mean?



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Detective Anderson: Uh-huh, I do.

Ritz: I can't swear it was that white van, and I didn't go back that way, so I don't know if it was gone, but I bet it was. And you know what that means?

Detective Anderson: Tell me what you think it means, Jon.

Ritz: That he might have been watching me. The killer. Standing in the trees and watching me. It gives me the creeps, just thinking about it. Now, I mean. Then, I was pretty much fixated on the blood. And keeping Dave from yanking my arm right out of its socket. I was getting scared, and don't mind admitting it. I'm not a big man, and although I try to stay in shape, I'm in my sixties now. Even in my twenties I wasn't much of a brawler. But I had to see. In case someone was hurt.

Detective Anderson: That's very commendable. What time would you say it was when you first saw the blood-trail?

Ritz: I didn't check my watch, but I'm guessing twenty past six. Maybe twenty-five past. I let Dave lead the way, keeping him snubbed up so I could push through the branches he could just go under with his little short legs. You know what they say about beagles—they're high-toned but low-slung. He was barking like crazy. We came into a clearing, a sort of . . . I don't know, sort of a nook where lovers might sit and smooch a little. There was a granite bench in the middle of it, and it was covered in blood. So much of it. More underneath. The body was lying on the grass beside it. That poor boy. His head was turned toward me, and his eyes

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were open, and his throat was just gone. Nothing there but a red hole. His bluejeans and underpants were pulled down to his ankles, and I saw something . . . a dead branch, I guess . . . sticking out of his . . . his . . . well, you know.

Detective Anderson: I do, but I need you to say it for the record, Mr. Ritz.

Ritz: He was on his stomach, and the branch was sticking out of his bottom. That was bloody, too. The branch. Part of the bark was stripped, and there was a handprint. I saw that clear as day. Dave wasn't barking anymore, he was howling, poor thing, and I just don't know who would do something like that. He must have been a maniac. Will you catch him, Detective Anderson?

Detective Anderson: Oh, yes. We'll catch him.

### 3

The Estelle Barga parking lot was almost as big as the one at the Kroger's where Ralph Anderson and his wife shopped on Saturday afternoons, and on this July evening it was totally filled. Many of the bumpers bore Golden Dragons stickers, and a few rear windows had been soaped with exuberant slogans: WE WILL ROCK YOU; DRAGONS WILL BURN BEARS; CAP CITY HERE WE COME; THIS YEAR IT'S OUR TURN. From the field, where the lights had been turned on (although it would be daylight for quite a while yet), there arose cheering and rhythmic clapping.

Troy Ramage, a twenty-year veteran, was behind the wheel of the unmarked. As he cruised up one packed row and down another, he said, "Whenever I come here, I always wonder who the hell Estelle Barga was, anyway."

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Ralph made no reply. His muscles were tight, his skin was hot, and his pulse felt like it was red-lining. He had arrested plenty of bad doers over the years, but this was different. This was particularly awful. And personal. That was the worst: it was personal. He had no business being part of the arrest, and knew it, but following the last round of budget cuts, there were only three full-time detectives on the Flint City police force's roster. Jack Hoskins was on vacation, fishing somewhere in the back of beyond, and good riddance. Betsy Riggins, who should have been on maternity leave, would be assisting the State Police with another aspect of this evening's work.

He hoped to God they weren't going too fast. He had expressed that worry to Bill Samuels, the Flint County district attorney, just that afternoon, in their pre-arrest conference. Samuels was a little young for the post, just thirty-five, but he belonged to the right political party, and he was sure of himself. Not cocksure, there was that, but undoubtedly gung-ho.

"There are still some rough edges I'd like to smooth out," Ralph said. "We don't have all the background. Plus, he's going to say he has an alibi. Unless he just gives it up, we can be sure of that."

"If he does," Samuels had replied, "we'll knock it down. You know we will."

Ralph had no doubt of it, he knew they had the right man, but he still would have preferred a little more investigation before pulling the trigger. Find the holes in the sonofabitch's alibi, punch them wider, wide enough to drive a truck through, *then* bring him in. In most cases that would have been the correct procedure. Not in this one.

"Three things," Samuels had said. "Are you ready for them?"

Ralph nodded. He had to work with this man, after all.

"One, people in this town, particularly the parents of small children, are terrified and angry. They want a quick arrest so they can feel safe again. Two, the evidence is beyond doubt. I've never seen a case so ironclad. Are you with me on that?"

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"Yes."

"Okay, here's number three. The big one." Samuels had leaned forward. "We can't say he's done it before—although if he has, we'll probably find out once we really start digging—but he sure as hell has done it now. Broken loose. Busted his cherry. And once that happens . . ."

"He could do it again," Ralph finished.

"Right. Not the likeliest scenario so soon after Peterson, but possible. He's with kids all the time, for Christ's sake. Young boys. If he killed one of them, never mind losing our jobs, we'd never forgive ourselves."

Ralph was already having problems forgiving himself for not seeing it sooner. That was irrational, you couldn't look into a man's eyes at a backyard barbecue following the conclusion of the Little League season and know he was contemplating an unspeakable act—stroking it and feeding it and watching it grow—but the irrationality didn't change the way he felt.

Now, leaning forward to point between the two cops in the front seat, Ralph said, "Over there. Try the handicap spaces."

From the shotgun seat, Officer Tom Yates said, "Two-hundred-dollar fine for that, boss."

"I think we'll get a pass this time," Ralph said.

"I was joking."

Ralph, in no mood for cop repartee, made no reply.

"Crip spaces ahoy," Ramage said. "And I see two empties."

He pulled into one of them, and the three men got out. Ralph saw Yates unsnap the strap over the butt of his Glock and shook his head. "Are you out of your mind? There's got to be fifteen hundred people at that game."

"What if he runs?"

"Then you'll catch him."

Ralph leaned against the hood of the unmarked and watched as the two Flint City officers started toward the field, the lights, and the