

the Riverhouse

By G. Norman Lippert

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Sometimes, when Marlena painted, she could hear the Riverhouse breathing.

She hated the sound of it. It reminded her of dead leaves blowing through a winter culvert, rasping with borrowed life. Often, she drowned out the sound by leaving the television on in the parlor, blaring and echoing throughout the empty rooms with its own borrowed life. She couldn't leave it on all the time, however. That would be crazy, and one thing Marlena Wilhelm certainly was *not* was crazy. She wasn't even slightly senile, even though there was a history of it in her family. Despite her advancing age, and despite what all the white trash hicks in nearby Bastion Falls thought, Marlena's mind was still as solid as cedar. This was what she told herself as she painted, sitting in the attic room near the round, leaded glass window. She was *not* crazy, despite the things that she heard and saw in the Riverhouse when no one else was around.

Which was most of the time, now.

A dull thump came from the floors below her.

“Mr. Stambaugh?” Marlena called out, her voice tremulous with age but just as commanding as it had always been, back in the years when the house had bustled with cooks and maids, workmen and groundskeepers. Now there was just Mr. Stambaugh, and he only came a few times a week. She knew he wasn’t there now, but sometimes she thought she heard him anyway, clumping distantly on the kitchen stairs or rattling doorknobs in the locked back hallway. She paused in front of the canvas, her paintbrush raised in her right hand. Mr. Stambaugh didn’t answer, and Marlena wasn’t surprised. It had just been the Riverhouse. Or maybe it had been...

She stopped herself, shook herself. Not today. She wouldn’t think about that.

“He’s gone,” she said to the canvas, not referring to Mr. Stambaugh.

The painting was finished, and yet she couldn’t bring herself to put down her paintbrush. She’d been painting all of her life, and yet this painting felt different. It showed her and her son and husband, Hector and Gus. Gus’s face was stern, immaculately shaven, as she always remembered him. Hector was smiling, pink-cheeked, balanced happily on his mother’s lap. She’d almost been able to feel him there on her lap as she’d painted him, as if the painting had reconnected her to that time when he’d still been small and sweet, bubbling with that sort of tidal love that only toddlers know for their mothers. She didn’t want the painting to be finished, not just because it had awakened the memory of that time in her heart, but because she knew, somehow, that this would be the last thing she would ever paint. Her vision blurred as she looked at it, and she sniffed wetly. Trembling, she set the paintbrush in the gutter at the bottom of the old easel and rubbed her eyes with her thumb and forefinger. There was nothing magical about the painting. It wouldn’t bring them back.

Hector would be a grown man by now. She thought she saw him sometimes, walking on the street in downtown Bastion Falls, or even hiking along the Valley Road, a man with dark blond hair and his father’s long gait. It was never really him, of course. She was suffering from the delusions of hope, that was all. She hoped for it so much that her mind couldn’t help bringing those hopes fleetingly to life sometimes.

That wasn't *crazy*, though. It was only crazy if she forgot that the visions weren't real.

She got up and stretched her old back. It crackled faintly, sending sparks of numbness down to her toes and the tips of her fingers. All around her, the Riverhouse sighed, and in the floors below, something clanked and thumped. Marlana listened. The sound didn't repeat itself, but she knew she'd heard it.

"Gus?" she called, but not very loudly. There was no answer. A gust of wind shook the round window in its frame, and Marlana spun to look at it, her eyes widening. Outside, the sky was low and steely, moving with sluggish deliberation, as if it had a long way to go today, and wasn't looking forward to the journey.

Another thump, very faint and distant, emanated from far below. Marlana's breath caught in her throat. That sound hadn't come from the first floor; it had come from the basement. Her knees shook beneath her, and for a moment she didn't think she'd be able to hold herself up. Then, she remembered to breathe, and as the air filled her lungs, the strength returned to her body. She strode across the attic room, entered the dark hallway, and listened again.

The sound came once more, clearer than before: a shuffling and a tiny exclamation, a sort of whimper. That didn't make any sense, though, did it? The river behind the house was a little high in its banks, but it was nowhere near flood stage. Why would it happen now?

Even as she thought these things, she fled toward the stairs, lurching to grab the banister and steady herself as she descended first through one level, and then the next.

"It's a trick," she told herself, her breath coming in quick gasps. "It's just the Riverhouse playing a trick on me. Like every other time." She raised her voice and gritted her teeth. "It's a trick, damn you, and I won't fall for it!"

And yet, she couldn't keep herself from traversing the stairs, even as they turned and looped back up again, forming the new section that the workmen had added several years ago at her behest, the section that the locals referred to as the Insanity Stairs. This didn't bother Marlana. What did they know? They didn't live in the Riverhouse. They didn't know its secrets. *She* wasn't the one that was insane. It was

the house itself that had gone crazy all around her, and all because of Gus. It was his fault. After all, it had been his choice to leave her and run off with the damned nursemaid, taking Hector with them. The Riverhouse had been his creation, and a part of him had stayed with it, driven mad and spiteful with isolation.

“God damn you, Gus!” she cried out, her heart pounding as she reached the base of the steps, stopping in front of the curtain that closed off the rest of the cellar. Her voice was thin, cracking with exertion. “Damn you! I hate you!”

She pulled the golden cord next to the curtains and they swept open, revealing the cellar beyond the thick glass window. Darkness filled the space, but not so much that she couldn't see the pit in the cellar floor, covered with its iron grate. Marlana threw herself forward, cupping her hands to the side of her head to cut off the glare.

There was movement in the darkness of the pit. Shadows shifted, and then something white moved between the rungs of the grate, reaching and clutching slowly. Marlana gasped so hard that her chest hurt. She swayed slightly on her feet. It was finally happening, just as she'd always known it would.

“Don't go!” she screamed through the glass. “I'm coming! Don't go!”

She scrambled at the gold chain that hung around her neck, seeking the key that hung there, but even as her fingers closed on it, she heard another sound, one that came from all around. It was a low laugh, delighted and amused. Marlana startled at the sound, and then pressed her face to the glass again.

The grate was empty. There was nothing moving in the shadows of the pit beneath it.

“I'm not crazy,” she whispered to herself, pleading with herself. She slumped against the glass as the strength leaked from her arms and legs. “I'm not... I saw this time... with my own eyes...”

The laughter was quieter now, satisfied. Every other time, Marlana had cried out in rage at the meanness of the Riverhouse. Now, she was simply too weak and emotionally exhausted. She had been prepared to do what would be necessary, even though it would be extremely difficult. Marlana had never been afraid of hard work. Hard work was, in fact, what she thrived on.

It was the waiting that was killing her.

She slumped to the floor and sat there, weeping helplessly, her legs tangled and her arms hanging listlessly at her sides. “I can’t do it anymore!” she said suddenly, almost accusingly. “I can’t live everyday with the weight of this hope hanging over me! Every day I pick it up, even though it’s so very *heavy*! And every day *you* dash it from my hands again! And *laugh*!”

The Riverhouse was silent now, listening, drinking her anguish like wine.

“I hate you,” Marlena said, quieter now. “I helped make you. I gave you life. But now I hate you.”

The Riverhouse was still.

After some time, Marlena climbed to her feet again, clutching the banister for support. Slowly, she began to climb the stairs. It took her several minutes to reach the attic room again, not because she was old, but because she was used up. The Riverhouse had sapped her, taken everything from her except her life. The bitterness of her loss filled her like lead, forming a very nearly physical ache in her chest.

“I always thought you’d come back,” she said, no longer speaking to the walls around her. “I was prepared. I loved you, Gus. Despite what you did and what you took from me. Why couldn’t you come back, and bring everything back with you? How could you be so cruel?”

The sky had grown darker beyond the round window. A storm was coming in over the trees, carried on a stiff wind. The storm would bring rain, and the rain would probably swell the river, drive it to flood stage. Marlena didn’t care anymore. The hope had been dashed from her hands, and this time she wasn’t going to pick it up again.

“The definition of insanity,” she whispered to herself, “is doing the same thing over and over... and expecting different results.”

She’d been doing the same thing for decades now. Now, it was time to do something different.

She approached the painting on its easel. It was heartbreakingly beautiful, much like the one she had painted on the wall in the back hallway, the one with all the locked doors, except that this time she’d

added the faces. It was complete. She smiled at it wistfully, and then picked it up in her hands. It was a small painting, but it seemed to have a sort of otherworldly weight as she held it.

Marlena carried the painting to the round window, leaned it against the wall, and then unlatched the window lock. The hinge squeaked as the window blew open in front of her, letting in the constant shush of the trees and the driving wind. It felt cool on Marlena's face and she breathed it in deeply. After a moment, she picked up the painting again and climbed through the window, out onto the ledge that overlooked the circle drive far below.

"I always thought you'd come back," she said to the painting, raising her voice against the stormy wind. "I was prepared. Maybe you knew that. Maybe that's why you stayed away."

She clutched the canvas to her chest then, heedless of the still-wet paint that smeared onto her blouse, distorting the image. It didn't matter now.

Before she stepped off the ledge, however, she looked out over the river valley.

A long time ago, back before Hector had been born, when Gustav Wilhelm had first brought her here with the idea of creating an idyllic home for them, Marlena had fallen in love with the valley. It was a boundary land, a line drawn between earth and water, making a sort of natural magic. That magic had captured Marlena and enthralled her. She'd thought to herself, *I could never leave this place. I could raise my children here, live here every day of my life, and die happy.*

But then, things had changed. Life had turned ugly all around her, and the Riverhouse had absorbed it, turned what she'd loved into a dagger, stabbing her with it every day.

Standing there now, on the ledge high over the brick driveway, Marlena looked again at the river valley, and loved it. It was a balm to her broken, pierced heart, and she realized something extraordinary, something that made her pause, frozen halfway between the window behind her and the yawning emptiness in front of her: *somewhere out there*, she mused tentatively, *there is still life to be had.*

Was it true? It seemed laughably ridiculous, and yet she wondered. She had stayed in the Riverhouse, despite its poisonous influence on her, because she believed that it held the only thread to her old life, the life she so desperately wanted back. If Gus and Hector were ever going to return to her, then

this was where they would come. The Riverhouse was the key to everything. She *had* to stay, so that they could find her.

But what if they were never going to return? What if it was ridiculous of her to hope they would? What if such a hope was... crazy?

Then she could leave, couldn't she? She could run away, and leave the horrible walls of the Riverhouse behind her. No more pit in the cellar, no more Insanity Stairs. No more locked doors in the back hallway, leading to nowhere. She could leave the Riverhouse. She could escape!

The idea burst in her mind like a sunrise, and suddenly the drop before her seemed terrible rather than beautiful. There was another out. There were other ways to do something different. Marlina drew a sharp breath, as if awakening from a terrible dream, and reached out with both hands, grasping the angles of the roof that overhung the round window. The painting fell away from her chest, spinning as the wind buffeted it. A few seconds later, it clattered to the bricks of the driveway below, its frame breaking with a loud snap.

That had almost been me, she thought. She had almost jumped. She shook her head in wonderment. Slowly, shuffling her feet carefully on the ledge, she turned back to the round window that stood open behind her.

Gustav Wilhelm was standing in it, lit by the gray stormlight, a small smile on his face.

"Hello, Lena," he said kindly.

Marlina looked down at him, her eyes wide but not exactly surprised. "Gus," she said thinly.

He nodded. "You always knew I'd come back."

Marlina tried to respond, but her throat felt locked. He waited patiently, still standing framed in the round window, blocking it. Finally, in a dry whisper, she asked, "Where's Hector?"

"Around," he answered, his smile widening, turning into a grin.

Marlina's eyes blurred again with tears. "You—" she began, but her voice cracked and fled her. She swallowed thickly. "You aren't really here. You're in my mind. I'm... crazy. Aren't I?"

"Yes," Gus answered, nodding sadly. "Yes, dear. You are."

Marlena gripped the frame of the window. Tears ran down her wrinkled cheeks. The front of her blouse was smeared with the colors of her final painting. It had been one of the best things she'd ever made.

"You're in my head," she told the shape of her husband, nodding slowly, firming her voice. "You aren't real."

Gus nodded in agreement. "Yes, Lena. But I'm real enough to do this."

And he pushed her.

Part I: The Riverhouse

Chapter One

Shane Bellamy awoke with sunlight streaming in through the sheer curtains and needling at his eyes. He sat up, feeling groggy and thick-headed from sleeping in an unfamiliar bed, and realized, with a mixture of trepidation and excitement, that he was officially beginning the second chapter of his life.

Take two, he thought with some bemusement, squinting into the early rose sunlight. *Do-over*, like they used to say back when he was a kid on Brush Street, playing horse in Stevie Burkett's driveway with a beat up old Spalding basketball. It was as good a term for it as anything, even after the months of sessions with Dr. Taylor, who tended to dismiss easy answers as "mental red-herrings". Shane was getting a do-over, that's all. Not everybody did. It was a little frightening and totally unexpected, but it

was also teasingly hopeful. Despite everything, despite all the ugliness that had led up to this moment, Shane decided to make the best of it. It wasn't like he had much of a choice, anyway. After all, there was no turning back, even if he wanted to; the one bridge he hadn't deliberately burned had ended up collapsing entirely on its own. *Structural failure*, he thought, and grinned bitterly to himself.

It was a morbid thought, and it pained his heart a little, but it also seemed like a good sign. *If you can grin about it*, he mused, *then maybe you're beginning to own it*. He knew he'd never look back on the previous year of his life and laugh, but a rueful grin was probably close enough. It was easy enough in the morning, with the dawn sunlight streaming in and the thought of percolator coffee rattling around all by itself in his head. Later, things might look a bit different. Shane decided to enjoy it while he could.

He started the water boiling on the little gas stove and showered quickly, wondering if he'd get dressed at all that day. Why should he? No one was going to see him. He was home alone in the small river cottage, completely hidden from sight within the dense trees of the bluff. In the past, he'd always been very jealous of the artists who worked from home, spending the entire day in their pajamas as they painted in their private studios. He'd never admitted it to the people in the office, of course. The staff at Tristan and Crane had maintained a sort of amused scorn for "starving artists", even though they contracted them regularly enough. Despite their nickname, the starving artists never actually seemed to be all that hungry. Granted, they were usually thin and squirrely-looking, but Shane was fairly certain that being thin was just part of the mystique. Whenever the contract artists showed up at the agency for client meetings, they invariably wore black and had some combination of creative facial hair, rimless glasses or indecipherable tattoos in interesting places. Compared to them, Shane barely qualified as an artist.

Not that he wasn't good. Shane was very good, and he knew it. It was just that, to him, the act of drawing and painting was like any other manual job; like laying bricks or digging a trench. He knew that art required skill and talent, but so did operating a bulldozer, and Shane approached it in much the same way. Like any other manual worker, he preferred to work a shift, putting in his time at the job site and

then being done with it for the rest of the day. This meant that he'd never had to rely on the quirky vagaries of inspiration to get the job done.

Unlike the starving artists back at T and C, Shane preferred to bypass the legendary artist's muse, which could be fickle and temperamental and prone to long vacations. Instead, he relied on a sort of foreman in his head, one who had the blueprint for any given job and knew exactly where the marks needed to be. The foreman would call out the orders, and Shane's hand would simply obey. Shane himself barely had to pay attention. He may have been a teensy bit jealous of the starving artists, with their auras of quirky eccentricity (which the rest of the world seemed to think of as the mark of the "true artiste") but he didn't envy the way they worked. For Shane, sitting around and waiting for inspiration to strike was both silly and unnecessary; he had long ago learned the way down to the well of creativity, and figured out how to dip out whatever he needed all by himself. For him, waiting on the muse was a sucker's game.

While the coffee percolated, he went to get dressed. Starving artists might be the kind to lurk around their apartments all day in their underwear, but Shane was too used to the routine. This would be his first shift in the cottage, but there was no reason things should be any different. The movers had been very thorough and Shane had officially unpacked his studio yesterday afternoon, setting up his easel, art board and work table exactly as it had been at his apartment. He'd decided on the little upstairs room with the canted ceiling on one side and the single window on the end, positioning the canvas so as to take full advantage of the morning light. In many ways, the new studio was even better than the big studio back in New York. Maybe, he mused, he should have done this years ago. It had never crossed his mind, of course, and if it hadn't been for the lay-off, the divorce, and... well, everything else, it certainly never would have. As bad as all of that had been, at least it had led to this.

He looked at his watch as he climbed onto the stool before the huge canvas. It was two minutes before eight. He was a little early, but that was fine. He set his coffee mug on the side table, in the little cleared space on the corner that wasn't cluttered with paint tubes, brushes, magazines and CD cases, and

looked up. The sign on the wall over his easel had come with him from his office back at Tristan and Crane. He'd hand-lettered it himself. It read:

"I often seem to have more in common with mathematicians than with my fellow artists." – M. C. Escher.

He read it as he rolled a brush head between his thumb and forefinger, absently shaping the bristles, and then he looked down at the canvas before him. It was only half finished. The top half showed a nearly photorealistic castle in the distance, blue with haze against an almost absurdly dramatic, stormy sky. There was supposed to be a forested foreground scene as well, full of huge, ancient trees—"loaded with personality" the art director had instructed—with a winding, curving path cutting through the middle. It was a matte painting, intended for use in a television movie that was currently being produced for TBS.

Despite his skills, Shane was not particularly creative. He couldn't invent. He could, however, mimic, and this had made him very good at finding resource material. There were magazine clippings and computer printouts taped all around the edge of the canvas, and dozens more tacked to the art board below the M. C. Escher quote. The images showed a dizzying variety of forest scenes, mountainous vistas, stormy clouds, tree close-ups, sprawling redwood canopies, and ancient castles. Shane had cobbled all of these elements together in the original sketch of the scene, and that sketch had been enough to get him the contract with the production studio in the first place—his first contract since being laid off from the agency early last year. Now, his original sketch was mounted on a smaller easel next to the canvas. Shane looked from the sketch to the various reference materials, connecting the elements in his head, and then began to paint.

It was better today, but not great. Progress has been slow lately, and this was slightly worrisome to Shane. The problem wasn't that the inspiration wasn't there, of course; that wasn't the kind of artist Shane was. Instead, the problem simply seemed to be one of focus. The foreman in his head still told his

hand where the marks were supposed to go, filling up the white and bringing the image to life, but for some reason he had gotten a little lazy about the schedule. Shane would find himself getting bogged down in the details, spending far too much time on minutiae and forgetting the overall scene. He'd lean gradually closer and closer to the canvas until the brush was barely inches in front of his eyes, teasing out some tiny, insignificant detail that wouldn't even be visible in the final film.

He'd been working on the painting for almost two weeks, back in the old apartment, and it was due for delivery to the production studio in Los Angeles in four days. Normally, he'd have been easily finished by now, the painting leaning in the corner and drying while he milked the deadline, reading paperback novels and playing Sudoku on his computer. Instead, it looked like he'd barely be done in time, and he'd had to start mixing his oils with an alkyd gel so the paint would dry soon enough to ship. It worried him, partly because he needed this contract, needed to prove to himself and his clients that he could still produce, even outside of the world of Tristan and Crane. But it also worried him because it made him feel like he wasn't in control of the art anymore. After all, he wasn't like the starving artists, the ones who wore black and had coke for lunch and sat around moping while the muse flitted around like an unfaithful lover, refusing to land and put out. Shane was used to going down to the well of creativity and sending down his bucket all by himself, drawing up whatever he needed, dismissing the muse for the fickle whore that she is.

Now, for the first time in his adult life, Shane found himself nagging at the foreman in his mind, reminding him that there was a deadline to meet, and that he couldn't afford to fritter around on a tree root or a butterfly or some damned bluebird on a branch that no one was ever going to see. Maybe the foreman was just out of practice. If so, Shane couldn't blame him. Before this project, he hadn't painted anything for months. Probably, the foreman in his mind had been off on vacation during those months, getting tan and lazy somewhere, and was just now getting back into the swing of things. Shane hoped that was all there was to it. He strongly preferred the foreman in his mind to the muse. After all, anthropomorphic visualizations aside, the foreman in his mind was really just Shane himself. He could

control the foreman, make him do the work. The muse, however, was different. She was her own, and she was capricious. *Screw her*, Shane thought as he painted, and not for the first time. *Screw the muse and the paintbrush she rode in on.*

Metaphorically, of course.

He caught himself focusing in on a boulder by the path, spending way too much time sponging on a layer of moss, dark forest green on the bottom, bright lime green on the top, where the sun was hitting it. He sat back, blinking and shaking his head. How much time had he wasted on that? He refused to look at his watch. Instead, he reached for his coffee, took a sip, and then grimaced. It was stone cold.

Damn.

Two o'clock came and Shane clumped downstairs for some late lunch. Steph had always told him that he needed to take a snack with him when he went to paint. "Take a banana or a muffin," she'd say. "Quit starving yourself. You're telling your body to pack on the fat, like a bear getting ready to hibernate." Sometimes Shane did bring a snack with him, but once the shift started, he'd forget all about it. For whatever reason, the foreman in his head allowed the occasional sip of coffee, but never any snack breaks. As a result, once the mental whistle blew promptly at two o'clock, Shane always found himself ravenously hungry, ready to eat whatever was in sight. Today was no different.

He slapped together a ham sandwich and ate it standing by the sliding back door, looking out over the patio and the river below.

It was a grand view indeed, even if the Missouri wasn't going to win any Most-Beautiful-River-of-the-Year awards. It was still swollen high in its banks, nearly opaque with mud. It looked thick enough to walk on, and the effect was only increased by the amount of flotsam slogging along on the slow current. Uprooted logs and broken branches of all sizes mingled with a colorful variety of trash and debris, all greedily collected by the river during its most recent flood.

It had been a big year for floods in the Missouri river valley, but the people who lived there had grown accustomed to just rolling with it. Shane had always marveled at the attitude of the locals toward the river, at their shrugging resilience in the face of such a huge and unpredictable neighbor. Much like them, though, he had recently endured his own fairly devastating flood, albeit a uniquely personal one. In the aftermath, just like everybody else, he'd simply had to suck it up, muck out all the stinking mud, decide what was salvageable from his old life, and try to move on.

Shane had contemplated suicide, and more than once. Not because he was depressed (or so he truly believed) but because he was just so tired. Dr. Taylor had helped—probably more than Shane was willing to admit—but it had been a near thing. Moving on was such damn hard work. He'd thought that he'd had his life all put together, patted down and comfortable by the ripe old age of thirty-three. It hadn't been a particularly exciting life, but it had been his, and it had looked more or less the way he'd always hoped it would. He'd had a decent job doing what he liked to do, a good-looking and fairly pleasant wife, a nice apartment just across the river in New Jersey, and a new Saab that was still, on the day that everything had begun to go neatly to hell, smelling a bit like it had just rolled off the lot.

Less than a year later, he had none of those things anymore, not even the Saab with its persistent new car smell. All he had left was the vacation cottage and his art, and even the art was, at the moment, a little shaky. It had been a long journey, a terrible, devastating flood, but Shane consoled himself in the knowledge that, at long last, the worst was finally over. Such things only happened once in a lifetime, and

at least his was now behind him. By comparison, whatever rages the river below might have in store for him seemed fairly manageable.

He finished his sandwich and walked into the bedroom to change into shorts and a tee shirt. Now that his shift was over, he'd decided to go for a bike ride.

The sun was a high, bright diamond by the time Shane rolled his bike out of the little wooden shed attached to the side of the cottage. It was September, and even though there was a tang of autumn in the air, it was still almost stiflingly hot in the river valley. Tom, the cottage's big gray cat, jumped off the tiny front porch, tail up, and padded over toward Shane, purring audibly. Shane had never thought of Tom as his and Steph's cat, since they really didn't do much to take care of him. He'd always just show up when they came to stay, and they would occasionally feed him or put out a saucer of milk.

"Why do you want to call him Tom?" Steph had asked when they'd first encountered the big gray cat, as they'd sat petting him on the back patio.

Shane had shrugged. "It just fits him, don't you think? Tom-cat. Tom and Jerry."

"I'd give him a girl's name," she replied, watching the cat stretch and spread its claws. "I can't help it. When I was a little girl, I thought all dogs were boys and all cats were girls. Some things just stick."

Shane had thought it both silly and a little cute.

Shane squatted and petted Tom on his big, bullet-shaped head. In response, Tom pressed his head and back up into Shane's hand, rubbing against his leg and purring like an outboard motor. There

were a few burs buried in the fur on Tom's flank. Steph used to brush them out when they'd come, and Tom would always patiently endure it, but it was a lost cause. He was an outdoor cat; for him, burs were a way of life. As Shane squatted, he glanced aside, into the tiny window that peeked into the cottage's cramped basement. There was only one light inside, a bare bulb hung from ancient black wiring, and it was on. Shane shook his head a little.

"Whaddaya say, Tom?" he said, still peering through the dirty basement window. "Looks like Smithy knows we're here, huh?"

Tom purred even louder and twined sinuously around Shane's legs, arching his back luxuriously. Smithy was a pet name that Steph had come up with, the first time they had vacationed in the cottage. The real estate agent, a woman in her fifties, with square eyeglasses and very short blonde hair, had told them that the cottage was rumored to be haunted. She'd apparently found the idea rather charming. It was Steph's idea to give the alleged ghost a name, and they had officially christened him "Smithy", after the man that had taken care of Steph's parents' summer home when she'd been a kid.

"If he's going to live here when we're gone, he can at least earn his keep," she'd said. "He can be the caretaker." Later, whenever something would go missing—a sock in the wash or a set of keys—or whenever one of them forgot to lock the cabin door, it would be blamed on the elusive Smithy. It wasn't until their second year vacationing in the cottage that Smithy had taken on any sort of reality. The cottage did indeed seem to have the sorts of quirks and idiosyncrasies that would lead people to call it haunted. The basement light would be found on more often than not, even when Shane knew he'd turned it off the night before. Same for the light in the upstairs bedroom, the room that was now his studio. The toilet would even flush sometimes, all by itself, although never while Stephanie or Shane were in the bathroom. "Smithy's using the john again," Steph would say, a little wiggled out but not really frightened.

Once, according to the same real estate agent, a local radio station had held a Halloween contest nearby, getting people to stay in the old manor house next door, which was reputed to be even more

haunted than the cottage. The truth was that both the cottage and the manor house had once been part of the same complex. There was a story connected to the property, but all Shane was able to remember of it was that the manor house and cottage had once belonged to a relatively famous artist and his wife. It had seemed comfortably fitting to him. After all, he was an artist, too, even if he wasn't particularly famous.

Thinking that, and dismissing the troublesome but harmless Smithy, Shane stood up, brushed gray cat hairs off his hands, and straddled his bike. If Steph had been there, she'd have told him to remember his helmet. He hated wearing a bike helmet, but he usually would when she asked him to. It always annoyed him a little when she nagged him about it, but he sort of missed it now, nonetheless. Her nagging had meant she cared. He considered wearing the bike helmet this time, for old time's sake, but decided against it. This was a do-over. Steph was gone, and nobody cared if he wore his bike helmet or not, least of all him. He sighed and paused, looking over the cottage that was now, at least for the foreseeable future, his permanent home.

Everything about the cottage was sort of pleasantly miniature. There was a miniature porch that wrapped around the northwest corner, facing the driveway, a miniature flagstone patio in the back that overlooked the river far below, and even a miniature crooked chimney that climbed up the north side, in the shade of an elderly eighty-foot pine. The cottage itself was mostly made of stone with a cedar shingled roof, thick with moss. It had always looked to Shane like something a Hobbit might live in, sans the round door. It was perched on a rocky bluff that brooded over a bend in the river, surrounded on three sides by trees, and accessed only by a long gravel driveway. As Shane began his ride, pedaling down into the shaded valley of the driveway, he saw mud caked onto the weeds on both sides, dulling it and matting it down. It was possible that he could get stuck here sometime, he thought, hemmed in by floodwaters even if his cottage remained high and dry. It was something to keep in mind for next year, when the spring rains started up again.

Trees crowded the driveway on both sides, still and limp in the humidity. Shane was sweating freely by the time he came to the paved bike trail that crossed his driveway, almost in sight of Valley Road. He slowed and turned left, heading away from Simpson Park and in the general direction of Bastion Falls. He'd probably not ride all the way into town today, but he could if he wanted to. The bike path meandered and wove through the woods, curving back and forth between the river and Valley Road, and eventually merging with the road where it entered the town, at the gate of the floodwall.

Riding bike was the only form of exercise Shane enjoyed. Stephanie had loved to exercise. She had been a runner and a swimmer. She had been into yoga and Pilates and whatever else new work-out was being offered at the YMCA three times a week. She had been addicted to endorphins. As a joke, Shane had even had that phrase printed on a tee shirt for her—ADDICTED TO ENDORPHINS!—in huge block letters on a blue background, and had given the shirt to her for Christmas five years ago. She'd laughed out loud, because she'd known it was true, and had worn the shirt regularly to her workouts. Shane had been absurdly proud of that. The tee shirt had been meant as a joke, a sort of a booby prize (so to speak, hah-hah), but she had truly loved it, wearing it until it had gotten thin and faded, finally relegated to nightshirt status.

When she divorced him and moved out, she'd left the tee shirt. Shane had found it neatly folded in the bottom drawer of her old dresser, sitting all by itself in the back corner, like a forgotten relic. He'd taken it out and sat on the edge of the bed, staring down at it on his lap. The letters were still perfectly legible, even though he couldn't see all of them because of how it was folded. It read: ICTED TO END. It didn't make any sense, but then again, maybe it did. Maybe it made all the sense in the world.

Shane pedaled hard. He pumped until his thighs began to sing with the exertion, and then he stood on the pedals, coasting and letting the hot air stream through his hair. Like the trail, his thoughts meandered. As he rode, the events of the past year unwound in his head like the carcass of a dead snake, one that had bitten, but could bite no more. Shane let it. It seemed safe to look at when he was riding,

when his body was occupied and his brain was free to relax, to begin the long, possibly permanent work of resolution.

The first part was hard but relatively simple. It had begun with the lay-off. It would have been easier if all the staff artists had gotten the axe, but they hadn't. Tristan and Crane had let Shane and Rafael go, but they had kept Stuart and Monica. Shane had understood. At least, that's what he'd told Harvey Crane when he'd called Shane into his office. Tough times called for hard choices. He'd be fine. He'd always done well as a freelancer (not as a starving artist, of course, but as a *freelancer*; Shane just wasn't that kind of artist) and it would probably be nice to explore some new mediums and themes.

This had been bullshit, of course, from start to finish. Shane wasn't at all looking forward to going freelance again. It had been almost eight years since he had done contract work. All of his old industry contacts were surely by now either stale or nonexistent. Nor was Shane particularly interested in exploring any new mediums. It had just popped out of his mouth, sounding like an artsy thing to say, but Shane was an oil painter, pure and simple. He could draw, of course, and always sketched his paintings first, but when it came time to make the final product, when it came time to put in his shift, it was oils and sable hair brushes, period. Harvey Crane had nodded, his lips pressed together, and told Shane to let him know if he needed anything, anything at all: contacts, references, anything. Shane had assured him he would, but he hadn't. He'd not spoken to Harvey Crane at all since his last day. By the time he'd gotten home that afternoon, contacts and references had been the last thing on his mind.

Stephanie wanted a divorce. At first, wildly, Shane thought she had announced this because he'd lost his job. That certainly didn't seem like something she would do. After all, she had married him back before he had landed his job at T and C, when he was still eking out a living on Hallmark greeting card illustrations and the occasional magazine cover. Then, slowly and with a sort of dazed wonder, Shane realized she'd been gearing up for this for some time. Some cosmic bad omen had simply arranged for it all to happen on the same day. It was like he'd won a sort of bad luck Powerball jackpot. "I'm sorry,

Shane,” she’d said, not meeting his eyes as they stood in the kitchen of their apartment, standing with the butcher block between them, like a stubby referee. “It’s rotten timing, I know. Obviously I didn’t plan it this way. But I can’t pretend anymore. This has been coming for a long time now. I’m sorry. I really am.”

When Harvey Crane had called Shane into his office, Shane had been disappointed, but not particularly surprised. In this economy, everyone was watching their backs, counting their eggs, waiting for the other shoe to drop. But for Stephanie to leave him? That had come entirely out of the blue, like an asteroid in a disaster movie. He had been knocked completely speechless. When he could finally form words, he had simply asked her why. What had brought it on? His greatest fear was that she had been having an affair. He’d never even considered the idea before that day, but now, suddenly, the possibility of it loomed over his world, darkening everything in its awful shadow. It hadn’t been an affair, though.

“Not yet,” Stephanie had said, enigmatically. She claimed that he had been growing less and less available to her for years. He’d become too engrossed in his work, too disinterested in her and her world. It had happened so slowly, so gradually, that it had been almost impossible to notice, “like the frog in the pot”, she’d explained. But she was no frog, and she *had* noticed. At first, she explained, she had felt hurt, but then, later (and far worse) she’d just gotten bored; bored with him, bored with their marriage, and bored with life. At the same time that Shane had come to believe that he had finally settled down into the kind of life he’d always expected, Stephanie had begun to feel disillusioned and restless, depressed and alone.

And was it true? At first, Shane suspected that it probably was. Maybe he *had* gotten a little complacent. Maybe he had stopped pursuing her. But she’d never said anything, not until now. He loved her, and even if their life wasn’t exactly a storybook romance, it was pretty good, wasn’t it? And damn it, he was willing to work at it, if it would help. He’d asked her if it was too late to make a change, and even as he’d said it, he’d hated the way he sounded, like he was the bad guy, begging for a second

chance. He had just been fired that day, and now here she was, pouring insult onto injury, and adding a good bit more injury as well. This wasn't the way it was supposed to be. She was supposed to be telling him it was going to be all right, that they would make it through, even if it was a little rough for a while, but that she'd stick by him no matter what. She certainly *wasn't* supposed to be standing there on the other side of the butcher block, her eyes dry and avoiding his face, with her suitcase half-packed on the bed upstairs. It had to be some kind of dreadfully realistic nightmare. He'd wake up soon enough and find himself in his bed, slick with sweat, heavy with relief, and roll over and put his arm around Steph as she slept on obviously next to him, still there, still his.

But he didn't wake up, because it *wasn't* a dream. By that night, she was gone. Shane had lain awake on his side of the bed for hours, feeling the yawning emptiness next to him, her pillow untouched, her alarm clock not set. She wouldn't be getting up early to put on her sports bra and go to Pilates class. She'd not roll over when the alarm clock went off, wearing her ADDICTED TO ENDORPHINS! tee shirt, and sleepily whisper, "What do you say, Shaney, should I get my work-out here this morning instead?" Apparently, those days were over. When she'd been standing across from Shane in the kitchen with the butcher block between them, he had been completely unable to believe it was actually happening, that she was really and truly leaving him. But that night, lying alone in their bed and staring up at the ceiling, he'd found it all too believable. She was gone. Maybe she'd come back, but then again, maybe not. It was suddenly a real possibility, even a likelihood, that his marriage was truly over. The realization of it had hung over him like an anvil, threatening to fall on him at any moment, threatening to crush him.

It was true that she wasn't having an affair, but it wasn't true that there wasn't someone else. As the weeks drug on, Shane had learned about the other man, a guy named Todd. He was "a friend", someone Stephanie had met at the YMCA.

At first, they had merely chatted in the weight room, between the machines. Eventually, it had led to sharing coffee at the corner café down from the Y. He'd just been a listening ear, and Stephanie

insisted that that's all he still was. Nothing had "happened" between them, but he cared for her, and she cared for him. And the horrible thing was that Shane knew it was true. Stephanie might be a lot of things, but she was not a liar, and she was as straight as an arrow. She'd not disrespect Shane with a betrayal. And that somehow made it worse. He wanted to believe that he was the wronged husband, deserving of the respect of her devotion and commitment, worthy of the work of making their marriage work. But what he felt like was a child getting in the way of Mommy's love life. Her very propriety had reduced him to a mere nuisance. He almost wished she'd just screwed the detestable Todd, realized it was a terrible mistake, and then discreetly forgotten the whole thing. Of course, that might have been worse after all—maybe the human mind just liked to weigh the relative horrors of every possible betrayal—but it didn't make Shane feel any better either way. Sometimes he was angry, other times he was devastated, but it never mattered. Once Stephanie had made up her mind, only Stephanie could change it again.

The divorce had become final in early June. Todd had been long gone by then, although Shane never heard the full story of what had happened. Part of him suspected that Stephanie had gotten tired of him, too, that Todd had merely been a convenient tool, a shoe horn to smooth her transition out of their marriage. Another part of him—the mean-spirited, hurt part—hoped that Todd had gotten bored with Stephanie and had broken things off with her. Maybe she'd learn what it felt like.

In the meantime, they had split up the household. She'd kept the apartment, and Shane had gotten the vacation cottage in Missouri. This had surprised Shane, since buying the cottage had been Steph's idea in the first place. She'd grown up in St. Louis, and had always loved the area. When she'd first suggested a small vacation cabin there, she had been so excited and eager about the idea that Shane had been completely unable to turn her down. They had found the cottage during a house-hunting vacation in the Ozarks. It had been rather outside of their budget, but not so much that they couldn't swing it if they'd really wanted to. And they'd decided they *did* want to. They signed on the property that very week. Their first night in the cottage had been the last night of that vacation, and they'd spent it

in sleeping bags, zipped together and laid out on the bare floor in front of the fireplace. The next morning they'd eaten granola out of a plastic baggy on the flagstone patio overlooking the river, feeling the sun shine down, warming them, and Shane decided it had been a good purchase. The cottage was small and a little musty, but it would clean up well, and it was certainly idyllic. They had both come to love it.

When Stephanie suggested that Shane take the cottage, he'd been surprised, but not shocked. Apparently, she was making a break from everything, not just him. This made him feel a very tiny bit better. He decided he'd move into the cottage, just for a while, just until he figured out what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. It wasn't meant to be permanent. But that was before his last phone call from Steph, the one that had changed everything, the one that had turned the world onto its head all over again. Shane had thought it was all over. The divorce hadn't been nice—it had been extremely awful, in fact—but at least the book of their marriage had finally been closed. He could move on. That's what he'd thought, until that one, final phone call. Now, of course, he'd never know.

It occurred to him as he rode his bike through the flickering shadows, pedaling hard, as if to outrun something, that maybe life just doesn't work that way. Maybe the idea of a neat ending is just a myth. Maybe in real life no story is ever really over, everything is unfinished business, and the best you can hope for is just to accept that. It may be frustrating, but fighting it just makes you crazy. Shane knew all about that. Fighting life's unfinished business was a no-win game, no matter how you looked at it. Some things you just had to give up on, even if giving up was the last thing you wanted to do; even if giving up was the absolute hardest thing of all.

He was thinking about these things when he rounded the long curve that bordered the old manor house. As the trees cleared, he glanced aside, looking out across the big weedy yard that fronted the property, and was so surprised by what he saw that he instantly squeezed the brake levers and leaned on the handlebars. The bike scrunched to a halt where the trail intersected the house's ancient driveway, and Shane put down a foot to steady himself. The driveway was made of brick, embedded into the yard and

framed with lengths of chipped granite. Normally, the bulk of the house overshadowed the circle drive, especially as the afternoon sun lowered, but now the yard was awash with sunlight, glinting copper on the bricks and sparkling on the cab of the big yellow bulldozer parked on the lawn. The bulldozer explained everything, really. Its tracks were stitched all over the yard, dark and muddy. There was a crane as well, with a wrecking ball hanging from it like a giant iron teardrop. It was parked in back, in the shadow of the tree line with the river sparkling gaily behind it. Shane shouldn't have been able to see it; the house should've been in the way, but of course that wasn't an issue anymore.

The manor house was gone, reduced to a massive pile of rubble that choked the hole that had once been the cellar.

During his previous vacations in the cottage, Shane had ridden past the manor house dozens of times but had never really paid any attention to it. It had been a singularly ugly and dilapidated building, despite how it might once have looked. Slipshod renovations had hacked the place apart over the years, most recently converting into a duplex apartment, occupied on one side by a permanent resident and on the other by a series of itinerant fisherman and boaters who usually left their trucks and trailers parked on the grass by the front steps. By comparison, Shane's cottage seemed perfectly regal and pristine, and he was glad that the properties had long since been split up. Now that the house had finally been demolished, however, he found himself strangely curious; even, somehow, a little sympathetic. He climbed off his bike, lowered the kickstand, and began to walk up the uneven driveway, examining the wreckage.

It had probably been the most recent flood that had tipped the balance. Maybe the ground had shifted over the decades, or maybe the water had simply risen higher than usual. Maybe it was just that the house had finally outlived the cost of its upkeep. Probably it was all of those things, but the inevitable conclusion was that this last flood had sealed the house's fate. Time and entropy, the hungry step-sisters

of Mother Nature, had finally completed their work, transforming the house from what was once probably a glorious architectural jewel into the inevitable pile of rotting wood and broken glass.

As Shane got closer he saw that dust still hung in the air around the wreckage. The air smelled like mold and plaster. The foundation of the entryway was still there, with three stone steps leading up to a broad portico, now littered with bits of wooden siding and shingles. The torso of a not-quite-life-sized marble statue lay on what had once been the doorstep, looking like a fairy-tale crime scene. The front door was half buried in the rubble, split neatly in two right down the middle.

Shane looked out over the wreckage. The footprint of the cellar seemed remarkably small. Of course, the house itself had been larger than the cellar, having been added onto over the decades, but the original house must have been rather cozy, even with its high ceilings and tall, imposing windows. Shane liked classic architecture, with its painstaking craftsmanship and minute details, and he could imagine the house as it might have originally looked, tall and sprightly, its windows thrown open to admit the river breeze, its solid doors creaking on their hinges like contented sighs, huge oriental rugs on gleaming hardwood floors, the clank of pots in the kitchen, the snip of shears in the rose garden.

He could barely remember what the house had looked like when it still stood, in its final configuration, but the image of it in his mind, as it might have looked on the summer it was first built, was strangely, almost eerily perfect. In it, he saw pillars on the portico, two on each side, supporting a high colonial porch roof. He could almost feel them, the cool weight of their shadow. Was it possible he was right? He didn't remember noticing any pillars or high, overhanging porches on the manor house during his summer bike rides. Besides, even if such things had existed in the past, surely they had long since been stripped away, probably resold to some architectural salvage yard somewhere. Shane glanced down, at the front right corner of the portico floor, and then walked over to it, kicking aside a few chunks of rotted wood. Sure enough, there were two large circular scars on the old stone, faded but clearly visible in the bright sunlight. Obviously, he had seen these marks as he'd approached, at least on a

subliminal level, otherwise how could he have known that the original house had had pillars framing the portico? Still, the picture in his head was strangely vivid, almost persistent. It nagged at his thoughts, like an itch in the center of his brain, an itch he couldn't quite reach.

Or could he?

An idea struck him, and as soon as he thought it, he knew he had to try it. He walked quickly over to the opposite side of the portico, where the debris lay in a thick pile. There, sticking out of the top of the pile was the perfect thing: a length of wood, broken into a sharp point. Shane wrapped his hand around it, careful to avoid splinters (an artist's hands, after all, were his life) and pulled tentatively. The stick came free easily, about two feet long and heavy, like some kind of hardwood. With the stick in hand, Shane backed carefully down the portico steps, looking up at where the house used to be, letting the mental picture of it solidify, placing it in space. It was so clear he could almost see it. In his mind, the pillars were white, somehow both smooth and rough, like a stone from the riverbed. They tapered inwards as they rose, supporting the squat triangle of the porch roof, and there was a decorative window in the center of that triangle. It was round and intricately patterned, made of leaded glass and wrought iron.

Shane stopped in the center of the circle formed by the driveway. The ground here was packed dirt, with very little grass, and he remembered that this is where the renters had often parked their trucks and boat trailers. It was perfect. He hunkered down on one knee, closed his eyes for a moment, and then opened them again, staring down at the blank ground before him. Using the sharp stick as a stylus, he began to sketch rough lines on the dirt. It was quick work, and utterly temporary, but as he scratched the lines, forming simple shapes, he could feel the sublime sigh of scratching that weird mental itch. The picture in his head had wanted out, that was all. In all of his years as an artist, he'd not felt anything quite like it, or at least not for a very, very long time. Not since he'd been a kid. He frowned studiously down at the lines as he made them, and then adjusted his grip, choking up on the stick to get more leverage with

it. Weightier lines now, framing the initial sketch; eight deep vertical scratches to define the pillars, three more for the overhanging porch roof. Finally, leaning close to the dirt and using both hands on the stick now, steadying it, he drew a rough circle right in the center of the triangular porch shape: the leaded glass window.

Shane looked down at his work. A moment later he stood up, listening to the pop of his knees as they straightened, and tossed the stick aside. The sketch looked right. More important, it *felt* right. It felt the way the insistent image in his mind had felt. A long time ago, when the house was new, this was what it had probably looked like. Shane glanced up at the wreckage, and then down again at the drawing in the dirt. If his sketch was right, it had indeed been a rather inviting house at one time. He sighed and dusted his hands off on his shorts.

As he walked back to his bicycle, Shane realized he felt good. Damn good, in fact; better than he had in months, maybe even since the day he'd won the bad luck lottery and lost both his job and his wife in the same three hour period. He tried to remember the last time he had created art for himself, and couldn't. When he'd been a kid, he'd drawn for fun all the time, but not as an adult. Now, art was just work.

He straddled his bike and looked back at the decimated ruin of the old house, smiling with bemusement. Was it possible that the foreman in his head had had nothing to do with the spontaneous house sketch? Was it possible, in fact, that that sketch had come directly from the fabled artist's muse, whose inspirations Shane had spurned all these many years? Had she been the one responsible for that sudden persistent urge, like an itch in the center of his brain, an itch only satisfied by bringing the picture in his head to life? It had been a long, long time since she'd deigned to visit him. He'd forgotten how good it felt. The muse might be a capricious and fickle lover, but when she was good, she was very good. Shane could imagine how easy it'd be to become her slave, like the starving artists he'd seen so often back at Tristan and Crane. That wouldn't happen to him, of course. He knew how to go to the well of

creativity all by himself, using his rope and bucket to dip out what he needed, whenever he needed it. But it was nice to know that the muse didn't hold that against him. It was nice to know that she could still show up from time to time, even if it only meant a rough sketch in the dirt, drawn with a sharp stick.

Unlike making art according to the foreman in his mind, making art dictated by the muse had a sort of euphoric buzz associated with it. It created its own sort of endorphins, no less potent than those celebrated by Steph's old tee shirt. And now that he'd gotten reacquainted with the muse, maybe—just maybe—she'd come back. As he pedaled on again, pushing into the heat of the autumn afternoon, feeling that strange, contented euphoria of creation, he thought that might not be such a bad thing at all.

In fact, maybe that was exactly what he needed.

This has been an extended excerpt of "The Riverhouse", a novel by G. Norman Lippert. If you would like to be considered as a beta reader for the complete book, contact me directly via george@speedbumpstudios.com for a password, and tell me why you wish to read and/or why your input might prove helpful. Thanks for reading.