

fell back to the earth. Their ankles gave out immediately. On the ground, they crawled like babies, if they moved at all. More stepped forward, flew, then fell. It kept happening. It kept happening. I turned to my father.

He stared at all the people flooding and floating out of the hospital. He shook his head and said, "What have you done?"

"It's about a hospital where people can fly," I said.

"What have you done?" he begged.



ZIMMER LAND

W elcome to Zimmer Land," Lady Justice says.

I flash my ID badge at Mariam. She frowns at me from her chair in the front box office.

I use the employee entrance behind Lady Justice—all thirty feet of her. When it's quiet, you can hear the gears that move the huge scale she's holding up and down. The sword she has in her other hand is longer than my body, and it points directly at you when you're at the ticket booth.

I sprint to Cassidy Lane, a cul-de-sac module with working streetlights and automated bird chirps.

When I get to the back door of house 327, the fourth house on the lane, I'm sweaty, which I can work with. The bathroom in house 327 is the primary player's changing room. There's a timer above the toilet that lets the primary player—me most of the time—know when patrons expect to start getting their justice on. Two minutes. I strip down to my briefs, then I put on my armor. We use outdated versions of the exoskeleton battle suits that the marines use. I start with the mecha-bottoms: a pair of hard brown orgometal pants that make me limp before

they're activated. Once they're activated, I can squat a half ton. Once I have the mecha-bottoms on, I jump into baggy jeans. Then I latch into my mecha-top—two orgometal panels that snap together over my chest and back. It feels like a skin-on-skin hug that doesn't stop. With my top secure, I open a pack of stretchy white tees. There are three in the bag; I'll go through at least two bags this shift. I throw on boots, and I put on dark sunglasses to protect my eyes. I take a deep breath. The mirror in the bathroom is two panels. I check myself out on one side, make sure I look the part. The other panel is a large receiver screen that shows me the inside of house 336 and the patron/patrons I'll soon be introduced to. I tighten my belt. I touch my toes and swing my arms a few times. The last thing I do is grab what looks like a skinny joint but is actually the remote to activate the mecha-suit.

I locate myself in Cassidy Lane's primary player: a young man who is up to no good or nothing at all.

I tuck the trigger/joint behind my ear as the buzzer goes off. I watch the screen.

The patron looks like he's in his forties. He's kind of fat with reddish hair and wearing jeans and a T-shirt. He sits on a couch. He has an orange bracelet on his wrist, which means he's signed the waiver for full contact. Green means I can't touch them. Orange means I can engage the patron with reasonable and moderate physical contact to enhance the module's visceral engagement. Green or orange. I don't know which patrons are worse.

The induction process begins: in house 336, a voice like warm gravy comes in through speakers shaped like books on a bookcase: "Welcome to Cassidy Lane, your home, your safe place." The voice recaps how the patron has performed to that point, explaining everything in a tight little narrative

that covers whether or not they succeeded in identifying who was stealing money at the Work Jerk module, how amazing it was when they stopped that terrorist plot during the Terror Train module (if they chose to pay an additional \$35), and how now, finally, they can go relax, safe at home. That is until . . . the voice tremors with worry. "What's this? It seems today isn't just any day on Cassidy Lane." Then an automation sends the blinds shooting open as if the house is possessed by a poltergeist. "He's here again. The stranger. You've seen him walking around. Wandering closer and closer to your home. This week, you're the head of the neighborhood watch. Maybe it's time you asked him a few questions." A chime goes off. Three holes in the wooden floor open and up pop three different pedestals. Pedestal A has a holophone that could be used to call the cops, family members, or anybody else. Pedestal B has a gun (a BB gun that sounds and looks like the real thing). And pedestal C is empty. It's for the tough-guy patrons. Almost all patrons (84 percent when I've been on the module) grab the gun on pedestal B. Almost nobody uses the holophone. "Remember, this is your home, not his." And then it begins.

I go outside, breathe in the fresh air, then loiter. I stand around and do nothing. I look at my phone, and once in a while I touch the joint behind my ear. And then I walk down the street slowly.

The patron opens his door.

He's not smiling. The engagement protocol on the lane is response through mimicry. If he's not smiling at me, I'm definitely not smiling back at him.

"Aye, buddy," the first patron of the day says to me. I look at him like he is looking at me. Eyes squinting, jaw clenched.

"Hey, buddy," I say from the sidewalk. He's in the street, coming toward me.

"I got a question for you," he says, kind of jogging toward me.

"That's all right," I say. And make to walk away.

"Now you wait just a second. I want to know what you're doing here."

"What are *you* doing here?" I ask. The patron's cheeks get red. Then his chest puffs out. He steps up onto the sidewalk so we can be about the same height.

"I live here. This is my home. I belong here."

"So do I," I say.

"You still haven't answered my question. What is it you're doing here?"

"You haven't answered my question either," I say.

He moves his head to look around, then focuses back on me. "I just did. I live here. That's what I'm doing. Living. Now what are you doing?"

"Same," I say. "Living." Then I turn my back to him to keep walking away.

"You listen to me. I don't want any trouble. I'm asking you a simple question." He raises his voice, so I do, too.

"I'm not answering any of your questions," I say, turning back to look at him. His hands hover near his waistline.

"Then I'm gonna have to ask you to get on outta here."

"You in charge?" I ask. "You're the boss of the world?"

"To you I am. Now fuck outta here."

"What?" I say.

"I said get the fuck outta here!" the patron says. He's screaming at me.

"I'm not going anywhere," I say without raising my voice, ignoring engagement protocol.

"Listen, I don't want any thugs out here. You have to go."

I march a little circle around the man and laugh. "I'm go-

ing to do what I want." His fist catches me under the ear, and it makes me shuffle back. He knocks the glasses off my face. I don't usually get caught so off guard. I grab the joint behind my ear and put it in my mouth. I bite down on it, and the pressure triggers mecha-suit activation. The orgometal on my legs and chest expands, and I can feel it synching to my body. The orgometal hugs me tighter, and soon I can't tell where the machine starts and the human begins. Everything gets easier. Activating the suit feels like stepping out of water into open air, like freedom. I had to do a week of training in the suit to get certified to use it.

"Fuck you," I say, and it's easy to be a convincing actor. The orgometal makes the pants that were baggy tight. Same for my shirt. I become a huge block of muscle. Something different, more dangerous than a man. My head hurts. The patron's eyes go wide for a second. I locate: I'm a kid hit by a stranger. Instead of his face, I punch a car that's in a driveway near me. The metal folds around my fist. Then I walk toward him. I take two steps. He points the handgun at me. I locate: your life is in the hands of someone who doesn't even know you and thinks you don't deserve it.

"Wait," I say. He shoots. Faux bullets explode on my chest. The mecha-suit is tweaked so pouches of red blood from one of four pockets burst on any high-velocity impact. I have to replace the blood pouches in the pockets every four walk-throughs.

What's left to do? I charge. My stomps are heavy and huge. He shoots again. I make sure I'm close enough that when the pouch explodes warm what-would-be blood gets on the patron's face. He's breathing hard, and Murderpaint™ faux blood is sprinkled on his face, and he's forgotten that he paid to be here with me. I touch the patron's neck with my orgo-

metal-enhanced hand. He pulls the trigger again. His shirt gets drenched. It looks almost like he's the one who's been shot. I cough a death cough, and then I fall at his feet. I make *oh, ahh* sounds. The patron looks down at me. *Pop* goes the gun a final time. I can barely feel the shot hit my chest because of the suit. I'm quiet, dead, with my eyes open, staring into the sky/the patron's eyes, staring right into his human. The patron runs to house 336, then back to my body. He picks up my glasses, then puts them down, wipes them off with his shirt. He's scared and thrilled. After exactly three minutes of the patron's not knowing what to do, three minutes of his thinking about taking my pulse, then thinking better of it, three minutes of his making a sound I always hope is the thing before real honest tears but is often just panicky breath, sirens go off. Saleh and Ash, playing cop #1 and cop #2, drive into the lane. They jump out of the car and sound very stern as they ask the patron what happened.

"He attacked me!" the patron says. "He tried to kill me." I keep my eyes dead and continue to shallow-breathe. According to the guidelines, he's to be brought into the second part of the module, the Station, for a brief questioning, after which he'll be emailed a complimentary story about how he was found innocent in court after claiming self-defense. When Saleh and Ash take the patron away, I lie on the concrete for another minute before getting up. Then I press a release trigger near my belly button to disengage the mecha-suit. I go to change my shirt and wait for the next patron.

When patrons leave and fill out their postmodule surveys—which have a rating ranging from one, meaning not at all, to five, meaning absolutely—they mark five all through the questionnaire if I was on the clock. Did they have fun? *Five*. Did they viscerally feel justice was at work? *Five*. Would they come

again? *Five*. In the comments section they write things like, "I'll be back soon. I'd bring my kid if I could."

I do six more walk-throughs that morning. I don't really feel like eating with anyone on my lunch, so I stay in my dressing room. Normally, I eat with Saleh, and we joke about how much we hate working, but she's been picking up more walk-throughs at the Terror Train, so I stay in the dressing room until it's time to go get shot some more. Then I clock out.

I wave to Mariam, and say, "That's my time," and she punches me out.

Once I made the mistake of getting into my car when the protesters were out in the lot. Since then, there's some kind of thing waiting for me at the end of every other shift. Sometimes it's eggs on the window with not-nice things drawn into the splattered yolks. Today, I see too many papers to count wind-blown and scattered in the area around my car. A bunch of them are stuck under the windshield. They flutter like leaves. I bite my lip and grab one of the papers before wiping the rest of them away. It says CHRISTOPHER COONLUMBUS, which I think is pretty funny. The first time they tagged my car, I cried with Melanie about it. Now I wipe away the flyers. I get in my car and hit the preset for my place. The car starts moving, and I recline for a nap. I'll be half-asleep when I get home, and I won't have time to think about anything before I'm gone in bed.

I wake up thinking about putting on a tie. When I got the promotion, the first thing I bought was a new tie. I imagine Melanie looking at me, her face soft with admiration. I imagine her nodding and smoothing out my collar. I don't know why I imagine that because she rarely did that kind of thing even when we were together. She definitely never did that kind of thing after that article, "Injustice Park: The Pay-to-Play Death

of Morality in America,” came out and the protesters started getting national coverage. Every day for a month, the news trucks circled around the park. Then they got bored and left, and it was just the protesters again. They weren’t going to get bored. After all that, even at home, I was a sellout for months.

“Why do you still work there, Zay?” she’d say when I was up late drafting a proposal for a new module on my own time with no guarantee anybody would even see the work.

“Cause it’s a solid job,” I’d say, even though that wasn’t the reason at all.

Then she’d say something like, “What’s a job without a soul?” And then I’d stop what I was doing and consider explaining to her for the millionth time that I hadn’t sold my soul.

“But it’s okay for you to eat here? To live here? That’s cool?” I’d say instead. And I wouldn’t bother with my usual argument: that it was better for me to get fake blasted ten or twenty million times a day than for an actual kid to get murdered out of the world forever. Did anyone ever think of that, ever?

“Really?” she’d say. Then I’d feel bad for making her feel bad about not having a job. We were a good team, and before Zimmer Land, we rarely made each other feel bad on purpose.

“I’m sorry,” I’d say, and go from wherever I was in the apartment to right beside her.

And she’d be, like, “I just don’t want you doing things that aren’t you.” And she’d rub my back, and I’d remember I love her for real and have since sophomore Theatre Players.

After Melanie left me, Saleh asked me if I hated her.

To be funny, I answered like this, “On a scale from one to five, one being ‘not at all’ and five being ‘absolutely and I’d pay money to go back even though she shattered my heart to pieces when she left me and then, when she got with Heland,

it was like she took those pieces and somehow further obliterated them to some kind of heartdust that she then sprinkled into the sun,’ I love her a five.” We laughed at that.

I can imagine Melanie looking at me now as I’m tightening my tie and ready almost an hour before I need to be, heading to the creative meeting I always said I’d get to.

Why do you still work there, Zay?

Well, Melanie, I think as I look in the mirror one last time, because maybe there’s a version of the park that isn’t complete trash. And also because, even though it makes me want to rip my eyes out when I see you with Heland, at least I still see you, and sometimes we even speak. That’s why.

I manual-drive all the way there. I park in the employee lot. It’s sunny outside, and we won’t open until almost two. It’s not even nine thirty. Creative meets at ten. I see cars in the lot. It’s disappointing. I wanted to be first. I wanted everyone to sit down after I was already seated and for each of them to take note of me.

Most of the lot is roped off with police tape and KEEP OUT signs. Beyond the taped-off space there are plaster walls that hide the new module they’re building.

In front of the construction site, there’s the trailer that management uses for meetings.

I open the door. The trailer is full. Everyone gets quiet and looks at me the way little kids look at themselves when one of them has done something wrong. Heland’s floating head speaks first. “Thanks for joining us, Isaiah,” his hologram says, smiling kindly. Heland Zimmer, the CEO of Zimmer Land. In person, he looks like he wakes up every morning and chops a few trees down before eating half a dozen raw eggs. When he’s projecting via HoloComm, he’s a giant head with a beard.

Also, he's white, a fact protesters remind me of very, very often. Heland is an idiot. An idiot who thinks he's doing the right thing. I think. An idiot with a black girlfriend named Melanie, which probably makes him at least 20 percent less racist in the eyes of consumers according to some focus group somewhere.

"What?" I say. The others on the creative team are looking at me.

"We're just getting ready to wrap up, but have a seat."

I look at Heland's floating head.

"Sorry," I say.

"Don't worry about it, get comfortable," Heland says. Chairs scoot up so I can pass. There aren't any seats left, so I stand in the back of the room next to a table bearing the carcass of a fruit platter and a puddle of coffee. "All right," Heland continues. "As you know, it has been a trying time for us, but we believe our future is secure. Next week, Lot Four will finally open up, and with it, a new chapter in interactive justice engagement. Doug, wanna take it from here?" Doug is sitting down with a laptop in front of him. Doug is Heland's right-hand guy. He's the president of park operations and leads the creative team. Once, after I'd fully engaged the mecha-suit, a patron called me a "fucking ape." He'd screamed, "Go back to Africa." I grabbed him by his head. His feet dangled. I hit him once on his side. I punched him so hard I broke two of his ribs. When Doug wrote me up for it, he told me it was a formality, not to worry about it. Then, two weeks ago, when I first stopped engaging customers with any real aggression, he said, "Make sure your heart's still in it because somebody else might want the job."

"Love to," Doug says. "Zimmer Land values creativity and innovation, always with its mission in mind." He clicks some-

thing on the laptop. The Zimmer Land mission statement hovers in the air behind him in hologram blue.

Zimmer Land Mission

- 1) To create a safe space for adults to explore problem-solving, justice, and judgment.
- 2) To provide the tools for patrons to learn about themselves in curated heightened situations.
- 3) To entertain.

"The things Zimmer Land aims to do at its core have not changed. And we've delivered with the situational modules we've provided. Now, thanks to the information gathered from our patrons and the creative team's work, we are officially ready to expand Zimmer Land and generate a significant increase in revenue, all while extending the reach of the park into a greater portion of the market. Our new module will spearhead this transition. This is the future of Zimmer Land." There's an unnecessary flash, then the mission statement reappears.

Zimmer Land Mission

- 1) To create a safe space to explore problem-solving, justice, and judgment.
- 2) To provide the tools for patrons to learn about themselves in curated heightened situations.
- 3) To entertain patrons of all ages.

When I see the difference, my throat dries up.

"Starting a week from today, Zimmer Land will officially be open to patrons of all ages. And Lot Four will be revealed as PS 911." The hologram flashes into a three-dimensional represen-

tation of the building soon to be unveiled outside. It's a small school. Doug explains the basic premise of the new module. How it will focus on juvenile decision-making/justice implementation. And how, with only their eyes, their ears, and their wits, youths will have to figure out who in the building is the terrorist planning to plant a bomb in the gym. Doug touches his laptop some more to take us through the halls and explains how many choices the module will offer patrons: you might team up with other patrons to stop the terrorist, or maybe sneak off and take on the terrorists alone, or maybe you aren't decisive enough and die in a violent explosion. He says the revisitability of the module will be greater than any module we've ever had before. "Any questions?" he finishes.

Somebody asks who the primary players will be. Doug explains there will be some new hires coming in for training this week and also that any current players who want a shot should audition the following week. I raise my hand.

"Does this mean the other modules will be open to kids now?" I know the answer, but I want to see everybody hear it plain and clear.

"Well, yes," Doug says. "Even our most popular outfits have started to see a sort of dry spell. The new traffic should alleviate that and create some dynamic new possibilities."

"And, of course, we'll start some testing in this new direction this week before we go live," Heland says.

"Any other questions?" Doug asks. Everybody's quiet because everybody wants to go. I have a lot more questions. "All right, that's great, guys," Doug says. "I'm really excited to see what we can do these next few weeks."

Heland's giant head nods. That's the signal for everybody to go. I watch the others leave. Doug is the only other black person on the creative team. I was going to say something about

that in the meeting—just as a talking point, just as something to get everyone thinking about what the park is doing and what it could do.

I don't leave with everyone else. Doug sits down. Heland blinks.

"I was told the meeting was going to be at ten," I say. I've already pulled up the email from Doug, which clearly said ten.

"Oh, that's my bad," Doug says as I push the screen toward his face. When I see he's not interested, I take it back. "That was the old meeting time; I meant to switch that."

"No harm, no foul," Heland says, smiling. "Nine from now on, sound good?"

"I had some things I wanted to bring up in the meeting." I have several things I wanted to bring up. "I think Cassidy Lane needs some big changes."

"Cassidy Lane is still the most profitable of all the modules," Doug says, looking at Heland, not me.

"What's on your mind?" Heland says. I can't not think about Melanie when I see Heland.

"Well, I think we need to offer more choices in the prep so the firearm option doesn't seem like the only one that will be"—I pause looking for the word that I think they'd want to hear—"entertaining. Right now, I think the module is kind of flat. It could be a lot more dynamic. There are a lot of opportunities before the patron-meets-player portion of the module for some interesting problem-solving work."

"I mean, I hear you, Isaiah," Doug says. "But it sounds like you want to take the thing that makes the module entertaining and strip it down. It's about being dunked into a situation and making the hard choice. How do you have real justice without life-and-death decisions? You know, some fireworks. You don't. That's how."

I look at Doug. "I've been working the module for more than a year. The majority of the patrons are revisitors who just want to kill me over and over again. It isn't a hard choice for them. I think we could make killing a less obvious option, and we could also make the killing, if they do choose that, matter more in the postsequence. It'd be more intense. I've drafted a thorough plan for an accessory to Cassidy Lane, which they could pay for in advance, that would take them through a trial process, where maybe they could find out that their decision to kill leads to a life in prison. Or they might have to meet the family of the guy they killed or something."

"I hear you, and you should definitely send me any plans you have," Doug says. "But it's important to remember that we want to capture that visceral, intense, in-your-face moment when justice is begging you to do something and—"

"I think we're equating killing and justice for our patrons," I say flatly.

"Well, sometimes it's the same," Heland says. "And sometimes it isn't. That's the magic of the module."

"Another thing." I know Heland and Doug want to go, but I have a lot more to say. "I don't think the mecha-suit is necessary anymore. It isn't realistic enough to justify itself in the module."

"You're killing me," Doug says. "The moment when you activate your suit is literally the point of all modules, where patrons feel most viscerally connected to the experience. That's the exact feeling we're going for. We need it. Plus, it protects you. It's a liability issue."

"How many teenagers in the world can afford a mecha-suit? It's surprising, but it isn't real life. A kid wouldn't have a mecha-suit. He wouldn't be able to become a tank and fight off a

grown man. He wouldn't fight through gunshots." I realize I'm breathing hard, so I try to slow down.

"I get that," Doug says, closing his laptop. "These ideas are all worth exploring, for sure. Send me an email, and we'll rap at the next meeting." Creative meets once a month.

"That's great. I like your enthusiasm, Isaiah," Heland says.

"Thanks," I say, and I walk out of the trailer leaving Doug and Heland to discuss other things and ignore what I've just told them.

The first time I really spoke to Heland was at the new-employee banquet. I'd brought Melanie. Heland had told me about his work on Wall Street, how he gave up all that money to be a social worker in Albany. How he'd helped high-risk kids smooth things out and found permanent housing for former addicts. Zimmer Land was the "next step in the evolving face of social interconnectivity and welfare promotion." He said that to me. And it's not that I believed him, but I didn't think he was lying either. Plus, I needed a job.

I head out to go do nothing until it's time for me to come back to the park and work my shift. It's still early, so my car is clean. No flyers asking me what it's like to sell my soul. It's there, in that open lot with no place to hide, that I see her. Getting out of her own car, going to the park to see Doug and maybe talk about the new hires. She's the new head of human resources at the park.

"How can you work here, Melanie?" I'd asked the second time I saw her in the park. The first time I couldn't say anything at all. "Well, I see it now," she'd said. "I get it. Zimmer Land could really actually help people see the craziness all around them."

But that's not what I meant when I asked. I meant how could

she stand to work so near to me and know we would never be the same.

“Hey,” she calls. The sound of her voice makes me wish I were a better person.

“Hey,” I say, and we both walk closer. When we’re only a foot away from each other, we just stand there.

“How was the big meeting?” Melanie asks. At some point, when we were still living together, I’d suggested Melanie try to see if Heland would hire her. I’d been joking, mostly.

Heland had a “talk” with me when he first started seeing Melanie, which was not long after she started working in the park. I don’t know when she’d first interviewed; she’d left me already by then. He’d said, “Melanie. Is that cool?” I’d said, “Don’t worry about it.” Then, two weeks ago, he called me into his office and said that Melanie had suggested me for a spot on the park’s creative development team. When he asked if I wanted it, I snapped out of imagining what strangling him would feel like to say, “I’d love that.”

“It was awesome,” I say to Melanie. She smiles. I stare at her mouth.

“That’s great,” she says. She touches my shoulder, which makes me feel amazing, then pathetic.

“Yeah,” I say, then I walk to my car and she walks to wherever it is she has to go.

Later that day I have ten walk-throughs. Eight times out of ten, I get murdered.

That night I dream about getting killed. Murdered by a bullet. I dream this dream often. But this time, after I’m dead, I feel my soul peeling from my body. My soul looks down at the body, and says, “I’m here.”

People say “sell your soul” like it’s easy. But your soul is

yours and it’s not for sale. Even if you try, it’ll still be there, waiting for you to remember it.

The next day, before we open, we have a park-wide meeting with all the players from the different modules gathered in the area just in front of Lot Four. The new module is up. There’s an American flag flapping on the front lawn of the little school, and a sign that says PS 911 up front. Melanie is up on a small platform in front of Lot Four along with Doug and a hologram of Heland’s head. Today Heland’s body is meeting with investors in Cabo.

“You okay?” Saleh pokes my side. Saleh’s half-Indian, half-Irish. She usually plays one of three Muslims who may or may not have something to do with a terror plot that could lead to the death of several passengers on a train from city A to city B in the Terror Train module.

Heland explains first that he’s very happy with all the hard work we’ve been doing and that we should all know the park couldn’t exist without us. “The face of real-time justice-action is changing. We were the first, and it’s only right that we continue to innovate and provide the world with life-changing experiences that foster real growth.” Then Heland announces that Zimmer Land will now be open to children. He explains that the newest module, the school behind him, PS 911, will actually be curated explicitly for youths. Saleh grabs my hand, then lets it go. Some other players look at one another awkwardly. Melanie bites her lip. At least she knows.

“Now, things will be a little different in terms of the patrons we see, but your jobs will be essentially the same. Keep pushing for the visceral,” Doug says in his heavy, comforting voice.

“If you have any questions about the future of Zimmer

Land, please see me"—Doug points to himself—"and if you're new and you have questions about your position and how to fit your role, please see Melanie."

"Okay, that's all," Heland says. The crowd lingers a little, then floats away.

"Jesus," Saleh says.

"I know," I say.

"We have to get out of here," she says. "At least before it was, like, maybe we could have done some kinda good."

"We still can, maybe," I say to convince myself as much as her. "We can still change some people."

"We have to get outta here," Saleh says.

"I just got put on creative development."

"So what?"

"So I can't just quit."

"You can do whatever you want," Saleh says.

"Don't quit," I say.

"Wow," she says. We look at each other, then she hugs me. Then she's gone. And I go to Cassidy Lane.

In the bathroom of house 327, I get ready. I skim the updated protocol that explicitly says not to touch the kids. All children wear green bracelets. I may, however, engage in the usual measured violence with of-age patrons in front of the children.

I'm walking through the lane. Minding my business or up to no good, just like every other person in the world. Door 336 opens. I see a man walk outside. He stretches on his front lawn, then turns to me. I don't know the man's name, but he's come to shoot me so many times it's almost like we're family. Then I see his son peeking out of the house. A little kid, as promised. He might be eleven. His father stomps in my direction.

"Hey, you're not up to any trouble out here, are you?" the

patron says. He's got a little bit of gut that sags out over his pants. Probably in his early forties. His hair is chopped close to the head. He's wearing a shirt with a knight on it, a local high school team's mascot. He always wears it. It's his killing shirt. It's stained a brownish red already.

"No," I say flatly.

"Well, I think you're out here causing trouble." The kid is out on the lawn now. He has a hat that's a little too big for him on his head. We're only a few mailboxes apart.

"Well, if you think that, what am I supposed to do?"

His face reddens. "Listen, this is where I live, and I'm not going to have you causing trouble in my home."

"Trouble like what?" I ask.

"Listen, either you leave right now or we're gonna have problems."

"You know what?" I yell, and then he hits me in the stomach. I fall to my knees and try to take a breath. I feel the mechanic begging me to make this easy. I get up slowly. I put the trigger on the ground.

"Come on, get out of here!" he says. He shoves me down again. I jump up, push his arms away.

"Are you happy now? Are you?" I scream.

"Dad!" His kid comes running to his side.

His young, green-bracelet-wearing hand clings to his father's jeans as the patron pulls the gun from his waist.

"Stay behind me," he says to his kid.