

The background of the cover is a photograph of a semi-truck driving away on a winding road through a forested valley. The truck is white with "America!" written on its side. The road is paved and curves to the right. The surrounding landscape is lush with green trees and rolling hills under a clear sky. The entire scene is framed by a thin blue double-line border.

BROKEN LINES

AN ILLUSTRATED
NOVEL

Tom Pappalardo

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BROKEN LINES

AN ILLUSTRATED NOVEL

by
Tom Pappalardo

*“Unprovided with original
learning, unformed in the
habits of thinking, unskilled
in the arts of composition, I
resolved to write a book.”*

— EDWARD GIBBON

AN EXCERPT FROM

PART ONE

Fire & Coffee

IN WHICH OUR HEROES ARE
INTRODUCED AND PLOTTY THINGS
ARE ESTABLISHED



“EVIL”

AN EMBARRASSMENT OF THREE-RING BINDERS

“Coffee time!” the demon sings.

“Put it there, Henry” his boss says. The demon places the coffee mug on a filing cabinet by the door and leans against the jamb. Henry doesn’t know why the Chief always asks for coffee. He never drinks it. The demon taps his foot to a song that’s been stuck in his hollow black head for days. Don’t let the name of the song concern you. It doesn’t affect the plot in any way.

The Chief sits on the corner of his desk. He looks brittle and worn. “Henry,” he says after twenty seconds of silence. “Bring me the telephone book.”

“No one uses those anymore, Chief.”

“Henry. Bring me the telephone book.”

The demon shuffles into the office, his ill-fitting rubber boots squeaking on the tile floor. He is dressed as a fireman. All of the demons are. They are Firemen.

The Chief’s office reminds Henry of a high school guidance counselor’s office. The old Steelcase desk is beige and scuffed, flanked by several filing cabinets, drawers half-open. Piles of Department paperwork teeter on every surface, though the Chief isn’t much of a reader, at least as far as Henry knows. The cinderblock walls are dirty and drab, a horizontal line at eye level separating an indeterminable darker color from an indescribable lighter one.

“Where’d you leave it, Chief?” Henry asks.

“It’s there, under those binders.”

Henry wades into the mound of three-ring binders and dives below the surface. A moment later he leaps out, a telephone book held high.

“Boo-yah!”

“Open it and pick a place,” the Chief instructs.

Henry giddily does as he is told. He looks away as he

points a finger towards the open book, adding a needless flourish to his wrist movement. “Aspirational Heights Economy Living,” he announces. “I think it’s a trailer park.”

“Wonderful,” the Chief sighs. “Gather some of the boys. Burn the buildings, burn the people, spread fear.”

“Evil!” Henry enthuses. “You got it!” He slaps the telephone book shut and lets it drop to the floor. “Leave no stone unburned, right, Chief?”

“I told you to stop saying that. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“No prob, Chief!” Henry salutes and hustles out the door.

“No prob,” the Chief mutters to the empty office.

KICKERS

THE WAITRESS IS ON AUTOPILOT, moving mechanically through the near-empty ‘Kickers 24/7 Family Pub and Sports Bar. Refill sugar, refill salt, refill pepper, dump half-and-half. Wipe down the surfaces, wipe down the drink machines, wipe down the booth seats. Windex the framed faux-vintage photos hanging on the walls, dust the pop culture memorabilia bolted to the bar. She organizes the menus and picks bits of lettuce off the floor. Eight and a half hours into her shift, and Maggie is trying her best to stay occupied and awake.

Big snow fell overnight and business has been slow. As the sun reveals itself over the ‘Kickers parking lot, two snow plow guys sit in the big window booth, bleary-eyed and exhausted, under a wall-mounted guitar autographed by Steve Vai. Duffy and Kev stare at the closest of the nine flat screen TVs in silence. Local news. “Sweet Caroline” plays from unseen speakers, muffled by the ceiling tiles, passing through the heater vents, propelled forward by the air conditioners, reflected off the tile floors, and absorbed by

*“We are what we
repeatedly do.”*

— ARISTOTLE

the cheap carpeting. The song creeps into the booths, the walk-in freezer, the drains and pipes. The line cook hums it. Maggie taps a finger against the side of the cash register to the beat. The plow guys begin an idle argument, unable to agree on who they're listening to. Neil Diamond, says Duffy; Kev thinks it's Barry Manilow. Neither man is awake enough to argue his point or look it up on Wikipedia.*

The only other customers in the restaurant — a cowboy and a spaceman — sit in the back booth. The cowboy chews on a wooden coffee stirrer (he's been trying to quit smoking and it's the only thing preventing him from punching his little companion). The spaceman is constructing a small tower of Smuckers jelly packs, a prime example of the sort of thing that might cause the cowboy to punch him.

"We're gonna need chains for the tires, I reckon," the cowboy says.

"Because of the snow?" the spaceman asks.

Cowboy's whole face pinches inward. "Yes, because of the f---ing snow. Why the f--- else would we—?" He closes his eyes and massages his temples. "I mean, what the f--- is wrong with you?"

"Too much sassafras?" the spaceman ventures.

"Hey! No fights in my section," Maggie jokes as she approaches the table.

"Sorry, ma'am. Sometimes the little fella makes me so angry I could just about bite myself, is all."

She eyes the Cowboy's revolver strapped to his thigh. "Keep 'em holstered."

"Will do."

"All rightly then. Your meatloaf okay?"

"Real fine, ma'am," The cowboy nods. It's terrible.

"How about your pancakes?" she asks the spaceman.

* They're actually listening to Frank Sinatra's jaunty big band interpretation from his 1974 album *Some Nice Things I've Missed*.

Double thumbs-up. His plate is empty. She wants to ask how he managed to eat a large stack of pancakes with a glass dome fully encasing his head, but she senses this line of questioning and the ensuing explanation would aggravate his cowboy friend.

Maggie smiles and nods and walks away because that's part of the job. She's a waitress, goddamnit.



MAGGIE HAULS THE GIANT JUG OF KETCHUP out from under the conveyor toaster. The line cook slouches on a barstool, staring at the muted TV above the door. Two more fires this week. The local news stations have dubbed it “The Winter Of Fire.” It has its own logo and dramatic stock music and everything. The cook sighs. “Jeezis-fuggin’-cries,” he says.

She lines up eight or so ketchup bottles on the bar, caps unscrewed. As she tops them off, she wonders if anyone has ever tasted the ketchup at the bottom of the bottles. “World’s

KETCHUP FACTS



- The USDA divides ketchup into five grades based on specific gravity and total solids: Standard, Extra-Standard, Fancy, Little Lord Fauntleroy, and Umami Fist.
- Each American, on average, consumes 71 pounds of ketchup annually. That is the weight of three average cocker spaniels.
- Henry Heinz, a successful businessman who became unstuck in time, created his ketchup’s “57 Varieties” slogan in 1896 while looking out a train window. He was inspired by a Baskin Robbins “31 Flavors” sign from 1953.
- Ketchup is a non-Newtonian fluid which changes its thickness and viscosity depending on how much Umami Fist is applied to it.
- “Ketchup” can alternately be spelled as *catsup*, *catchup*, or *kashyyyk*.

going crazy,” she says, shaking her head. It’s a bland thing to comment, but she’s at work, and work is where she keeps her comments bland.

Duffy and Kev drag their asses out the door, each offering Maggie a weary nod.

“Drive safe, gentlemen.”

The cowboy leans back from his plate. “Well, that’s it,” he mumbles. “We’re done here,” He pokes his coffee stirrer into the remains of his overcooked meatloaf. “Scuse me, ma’am?” he calls to Maggie. “Could we get three coffees to go, black?”

“You got it,” she says, focused on the reketchuping.

“Make one a large with sixteen sugars please!” the little spaceman pipes in.

Maggie thinks a sec. “I’m not even sure that’ll all dissolve,” she calls across the empty restaurant.

The spaceman mimes unclear hand motions. “It gets wicked good when you get down to the bottom.”

“Oooookay,” she agrees. She caps the refilled bottles. “Two medium black, one large sugar bomb, comin’ right up.” The spaceman applauds her accommodation.



“Whaddaya gotta go and do that for?” the cowboy grumbles. “I told you to just take the sugar and do it yourself. We’re supposed to be keepin’ a low profile and you go around collecting funny looks from people.”

“But the lady at the truck stop the other day got mad when I took the sugar—”

“*Packets!* You take the *packets!* Not the gaddamned glass thing offa the table!”

“Sorry, Cowboy.”

The cowboy hauls himself out of the booth, making an involuntary old man groaning noise as he does so. “You’re a real pain in my ass, you know that?”

Spaceman hops out of the booth. “You say that a lot.”

“It’s true a lot.” The cowboy drops a pile of crumpled bills next to his plate. He walks stiffly over to the cash register, where Maggie is securing lids on their coffees.

“All set,” she says.

“Money’s on the table.” He motions over his shoulder.

“Thanks very much.”

The spaceman grabs the cardboard cup holder and dances around the entryway, singing a high, wavering note:

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!”

“Ignore him,” the cowboy says. “He gets... excited sometimes.” The rumpled man heads for the door. Spaceman tries to wave goodbye to the waitress and almost dumps the coffees.

“Couldja be goddamned careful?” Cowboy chastises.

“Jesus Nut Crunch, it’s like I’m watching a four-year-old.”

“Caw! Fee!” the spaceman sings in a high falsetto, to the tune of “Roxanne.” He does a dead-on Sting, he thinks, and enjoys sharing his gift with others. He barrels through the door. Cowboy follows.

“Drive safe,” she calls after the strangers. “Stay warm.” She waves at their backs and they’re gone. She clears their booth and clocks out. After a quick bathroom pit stop, she retrieves her coat and purse from the ‘Kickers back room.

“Want me to wait for Beth to show up?” she asks the cook.

“Think I can handle the rush,” he says, waving a finger around at the empty room without taking his eyes off the TV. She watches the news footage with him. Car fires one town over. Looks like they’re blaming teenagers. “F■kin’ little shits,” he mumbles.

Maggie offers a non-word sound of agreement. “You on ‘til 10 or 12?” She’s just trying to avoid going out in the cold.

“Twelve.”

“Long shift,” she says. The cook nods. “Fella had big guns on him, huh?” she asks, tilting her head towards the door.

“Yup. Big calibers,” the cook agrees, waiting for her to stop interrupting the TV.

“Ever shoot a gun before?”

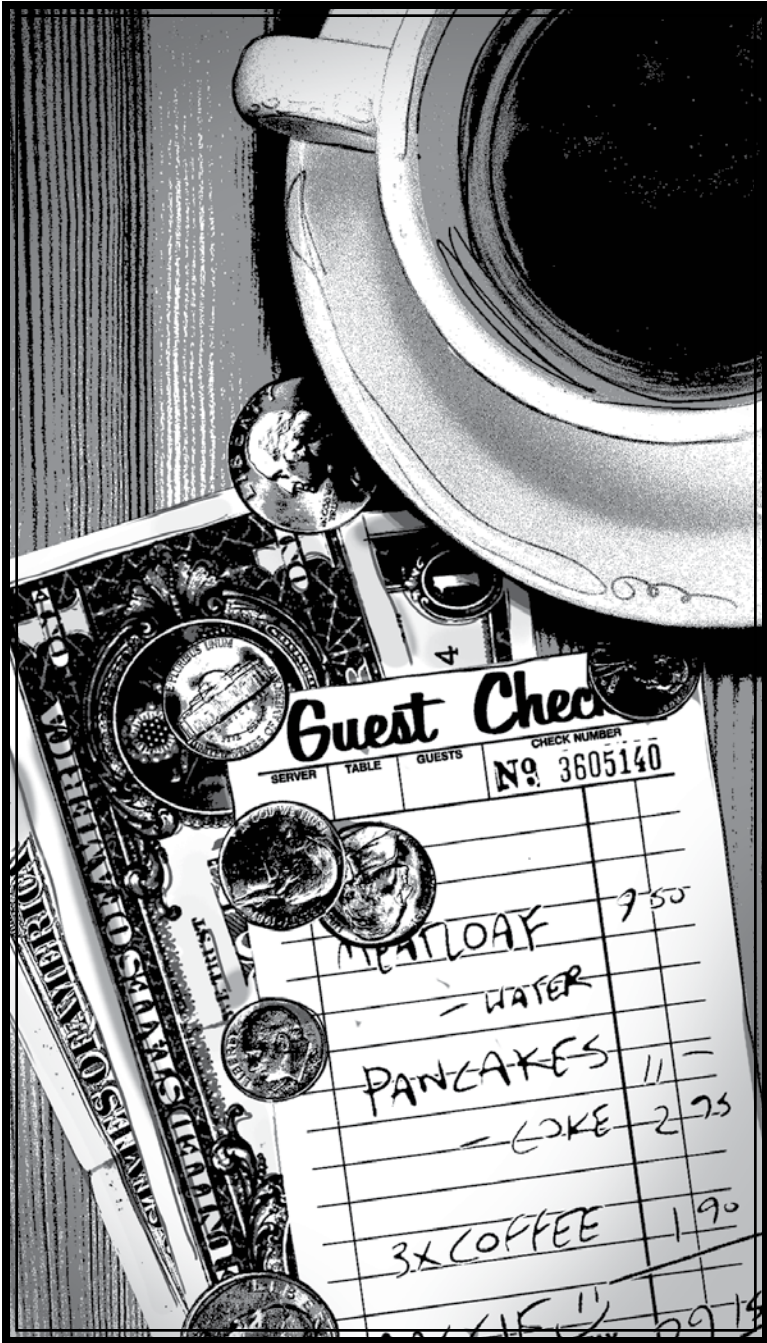
He makes a sound that could mean fifteen different things.

Maggie nods. “Well. I’m taking off,” she confirms.

“Okey-doke.”

“Bye, now.”

He never sees Maggie again.



MONEY'S ON THE TABLE

BIG SNOW

EXCLUDING THE LITTLE PUFFS of frozen mist suspended in front of her mouth, the sky is clear and blue. Maggie takes a gulp of morning air and decides it might turn out to be an alright day. Duffy and Kev have favored her Ford Contour with a decent plow job. The driver's side door is frozen shut, but she's able to pop the trunk and retrieve her scraper. She chips half-heartedly at the stubborn sheet of ice coating her windshield. On the highway side of the 'Kickers lot, the two weird guys attempt to free their RENT AMERICA! moving van from its less fortunately plowed space. The cowboy heaves snow out of the way with a small brass fireplace shovel while the spaceman peers out over the too-high steering wheel. The little guy somehow reaches the gas pedal, and celebrates with stompy insistence. The van's back wheels spin uselessly, dousing the cowboy with a torrent of slush.

With the groan of cracking ice, Maggie wrenches the Contour's door open. She decides to crank the defroster on high and go back inside for ten or twenty minutes. Maybe have a hot chocolate or something. This ice scraping malarkey is for the birds. She turns the key.



THE SPACEMAN'S top-secret experimental Multi-Environment Containment Housing (Version Nine) has an internally-powered heating unit and fluid recirculator embedded in the skin of the suit. The semi-reflective outer shell of the suit (A), along with being waterproof and pressurized for space travel, also captures solar rays and converts them into energy, which is stored in battery cells. The primary cells are located in his utility belt (B). Secondary power storage is located in the upper quarter of the helmet (C). Outside air is brought into the suit environment via a complex system of purifiers, filters and conditioning units. The Main Propulsion Cluster (MPC) located in the backpack enclosure has a thrust capability of 70,000 pounds (horizontal) and 50,000 pounds (vertical). The heads-up display (HUD, beta version 9.013n) integrated into the visor includes over one hundred view modes*. The Keypad Manipulation Controller (located on the back of the right glove) and the Voice Command Input act as the main user interfaces for all onboard systems. The spaceman has no idea how most of this hardware operates. He has been known to randomly enter number combinations into the KMC just to see what might happen. He seems constantly surprised and amazed at the random features he discovers in his MECH-9 suit.

"Hey! Check it out!" calls the spaceman, waving a fistful of wire (D) out the van window.

The cowboy spits out a mouthful of slush. "Hell's that?"

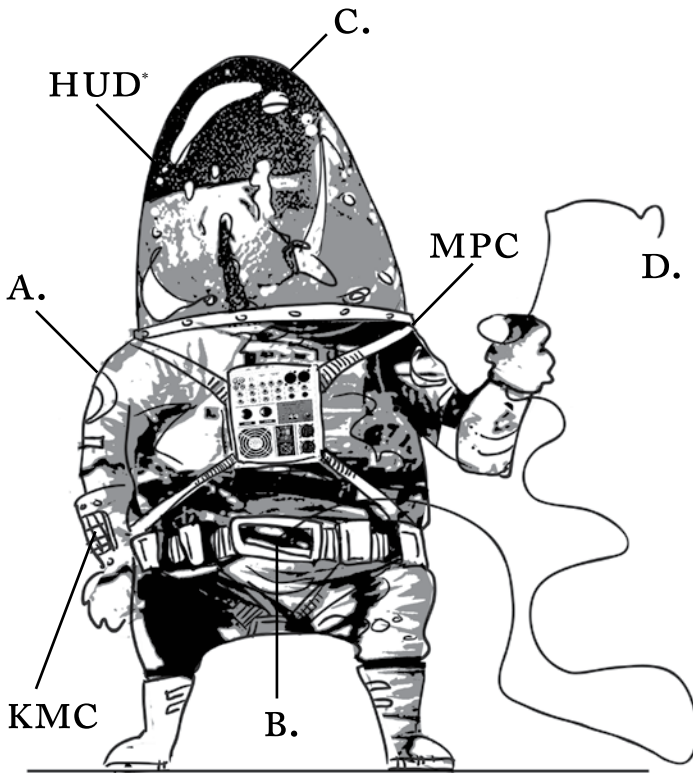
"It's like, a wicked long piece of rope?" says the spaceman. He hops out of the cab. "Look. It's on a vacuum cleaner-y reel-y thing on my belt." He shows the cowboy where the wire goes to prove he's not kidding around.

"Well, unless you're gonna pull the van outta this snowbank with your belly-button, I don't think I give a yankee doodle rolling doughnut flying f██k-all."

After careful consideration, the spaceman says, "No, I

MULTI-ENVIRONMENT CONTAINMENT HOUSING

(Version Nine)



* HUD view modes include heat sensor, night vision, vector wireframe, "Money For Nothing" 3D render, and a particularly useless feature allowing the suit wearer to view their surroundings through a sepia-toned "old-timey movie reel" filter, replete with piano accompaniment.

don't think that'd work."

"Oh, no?"

"Maybe we could hook it up to the gas pedal and both push from the back. I could like, work the pedal. With the wire. I could pull the wire."

"You gotta push the pedal, not pull it," the cowboy groans, rubbing his face.

"Maybe we could build a fulcrum. A fulcrum pivot?"

"Hi, there," the waitress calls to them. She has crossed the parking lot and is standing close. The cowboy cusses himself out for not sensing her approach. He's convinced the spaceman is making him dumber.

"Uh, howdy, ma'am."

"A *pulley!* I meant a pulley," the spaceman corrects himself. "Hi!" he waves to the waitress. The cowboy wonders if the spaceman remembers who she is. He's a funny one sometimes.

"Trouble, ma'am?" The cowboy points at the Contour across the lot.

"Yeah," she admits. "Car's dead. It tends to crap out in cold weather. I wondered if I helped you get your van unstuck, maybe you could give me a lift home." She points west. "I live up the road just a bit."

"Yeah! Sure! Great!" crows the spaceman. He steps forward and shakes her hand. "What do you know about pulleys?" he asks gravely, proffering her the loose handful of wire.

"Christ on crutches," the cowboy mutters.

"I thought," she says in a kind tone, accepting the wire. "Maybe I could steer while you guys pushed."

The spaceman looks at the cowboy and points to the waitress. "Awww! That's an even better idea than the pulley!" he gushes. He presses a button on his buckle and the wire whips out of her hands and retracts back into the utility belt. He marches confidently towards the back of the van. "C'mon, Cowboy! A coupla Push Kings! That's us! You an' me! Like a

coupla Clyde-Dales!”

The waitress and the cowboy stare at each other. “I mean, if it’s okay with you,” she says.

He chews on his chapped lower lip. “Nah, nah,” and after a pause: “It’s fine.” He scratches the back of his neck. “Ahh,” he begins. Parking lot slush drips from the brim of his hat.

“Yes?”

“We, uhh. We weren’t going to use a goddamned pulley on anything. He gets these ‘ideas’ sometimes...” The cowboy trails off, wagging a finger at his head, assuming he’s made himself clear.

She nods, smiling. “Sure.”

“Right, then.”

He slips and falls flat on his ass.



THE RENT AMERICA! VAN careens down the freshly-plowed road. Thanks, Duffy. Thanks, Kev.

“Where are you guys headed?” Maggie asks, tucked between them on the wide bench seat.

The cowboy raises a finger off the steering wheel and points towards the windshield.

She nods. “Uh, where are you coming from?”

He points a thumb over his shoulder.

She tries a different tack. “My name’s Maggie, by the way.”

“I’m Spaceman!” Spaceman chirps. He shakes her hand vigorously. The cowboy says nothing.

“Wow. A spaceman, huh. What’s space like?”

The little man shrugs and draws a dog on the foggy passenger window with his finger. She motions towards the to-go tray perched on the dashboard. “You two ordered three coffees,” she says to the cowboy.

Silence.

“You guys!” Spaceman whispers. “I just farted in my spacesuit *and no one can smell it but me!*”





NOT ANOTHER WORD IS UTTERED

WINTER OF FIRE

MAGGIE LIVES IN ASPIRATIONAL HEIGHTS trailer park, Unit #14 on the end of Access Road #3. She and her cat co-exist in a two-room trailer. There is aluminum siding and flowerbeds and a mailbox, but despite the trappings of house-ness, it is not a house. She keeps it neat and doesn't socialize much with the neighbors, unless she's doing a favor for one of the old folks. They like her because she's friendly and pretty and kind to them. She doesn't have a husband or a boyfriend or a girlfriend or any friends at all, really. Just co-



workers, customers, and neighbors. No one can quite figure out why she lives here or why she's a waitress (the answers are: She's cheap, and her friend Beth got her the job).

"Well, thanks for the ride, guys," she says as they pull up to her place.

The cowboy says "Yup" while he assesses how to turn the van around.



“We’re gonna miss you!” cries Spaceman, hugging her in the unselfconscious way of the young and the mentally challenged.

“Uh, yeah. Well, I’m going to miss you, too. It’s been a great...” She checks her watch. “...Uh, eleven minutes.”

“Yeah!” Spaceman agrees as she slides out of the van. Cowboy executes a muddy three-point turn and drives away. Walking from her mailbox to her front door, Maggie listens to the snow crunch beneath her boots.



EARLY EVENING DRIFTS IN QUIETLY, and Maggie shuffles around her place, unfocused and bored. She has pattered around the trailer all afternoon, car-less and without a decent time-killing hobby. Her cat has been sulking in her bedroom closet, a protest against her switch to a cheaper brand of dry food. Maggie parks herself at the counter separating the kitchen area from the living area and dicks around with her smartphone for the billionth time. Only two people have liked her latest Facebook photo of Mr. Kittywhiskers, which is a goddamned crime, because it’s an amazing photograph that belongs in a Cat Photo Museum. Her inbox contains one email: an offer for discount Canadian prescription drugs from a gentleman named Raphael Piñata.

Maggie throws her phone at a couch pillow and resolves to clean the kitchen. She opens the fridge and curses her instinct to refill the ketchup bottle. She shuffles a few condiments around. This is not how young Maggie imagined adulthood would look. There is a knock at the door.

“Who *iiiiiiiiiiiis* it?” she sings in a silly falsetto, assuming it’s her neighbor Mrs. Larkin, the only person who ever knocks on her door.

“Firemen, ma’am,” answers a deep and serious voice.

She pauses mid-stride, only to hasten her pace to the door. “Err...” she asks as she approaches. “Is there a fire?”

“No ma’am. No, not at this juncture,” the voice at her threshold answers.

Maggie peeks out her front window at the large ladder truck idling down the road. It seems a bit old to Maggie. Or a bit *something*. Firemen head towards her neighbors’ trailers. *Cripes, how many of them are there?* An image of an overcrowded clown car crosses her mind. She squints through the curtains and studies the two men at her door. Their faces are obscured by mismatched helmets and oxygen masks. Maggie notes their coats and boots don’t match, either, nor does their gear seem to fit particularly well. They look like trick-or-treating scarecrows She scans as much of the sky as her curtain-peeking allows. She sees no smoke. She sees no flames.

“So, uh... what can I help you with?” she asks through the door. She looks down and realizes she’s holding a jar of organic pickles from the fridge. “I’m, uh... busy.”

“The Department is doing a routine sweep, asking occupants to vacate their premises,” the other fireman recites. “If you could please open your domicile’s primary entrance, we will proceed to test its flammability and eliminate the inhabitants therein.”

“What the hell?” the first fireman grumbles.

The other fireman cries: “AHHH! QUIT IT!”

Maggie knows from her youth spent on a Catholic school playground that she has just earwitnessed a wicked hard arm punch. She backs towards the kitchen, raising the pickle jar in front of her like a briny talisman. She eyes her cheap deadbolt, which is attached to her cheap door, which is attached to her cheap wall. Her home suddenly feels less like a safe space and more like a broken promise.

“Uhhhh... this is a hilarious prank, I’m sure,” she says cautiously. “But you guys know you’re supposed to put *out*

fires and *save* people's lives, right?"

"Oh, no, ma'am. You're confusing us with firefighters," the fireman explains through the door. "They put out fires and save people."

"They're America's Heroes," the other chimes in.

"Yeah. We're firemen. We're here to burn and kill."

"People confuse us all the time. Ha-ha."

Maggie's eyes grow wide. "Cripes, it's been a weird day." A fire ax blade splits her door in two, and she screams.



THE AIR IS FILLED with smoke and the sounds of trailer park panic. Maggie hides behind her couch and tries to calm herself. She listens to distant screaming and the crackling sound of fire and acknowledges that outside, terrible things are happening to her neighbors. Mrs. Larkin. Mr. Foxx in 18. The lady with the blue hair in the blue trailer. The little prick with the BMX bike. She squeezes her eyes shut, acknowledging that she's in some deep doo herself. She clutches her jar of pickles for reassurance.

"Hell-ooooo?" a voice sings in the semi-darkness. She peers between the couch and the end table and sees the two firemen standing where her door used to be. Their names are Hal and Lenny.

"You see her?" asks Hal, peering into the dimly-lit trailer.

"Nah," says Lenny. He pokes at a splinter of door still clinging to a hinge.

Hal steps into the room. "Ehhh. Hello?" he calls. He touches the back of her recliner with his gloved hand, and smoke rises from inside the cushion. Maggie has no goddamned idea what's going on, but this is clearly not the place to be. Better to take her chances outside. *Save a neighbor? Steal a car? Call the cops? Hide in the woods?* With her heart in her throat, she swings around the end table and



WE'RE HERE TO BURN AND KILL

makes a break for it, wishing she could remember *Red Dawn** more clearly. In this — her time of need — she feels she could greatly benefit from a few choice nuggets of Patrick Swayze Survival Wisdom. In the end, it doesn't matter: she only gets about two steps before they grab her.

"Sorry, pretty lady," Hal says cheerfully. He picks up a magazine off the kitchen counter and it bursts into flames. He flips it over his shoulder. Her curtains ignite immediately.

"F███!" Maggie seethes, a mixture of fear and anger. She wants to ask questions, to understand what these sons of bitches are doing. She struggles, but Lenny has her arms pinned behind her back. Heat radiates through his gloves as he squeezes tighter. Hal, though wearing a gas mask, somehow seems to smile.

"Stay calm," he says helpfully. "Everything's going to be 'okay.'" He makes the 'quote-unquote' motion with his fingers as he raises his ax high. This is when Maggie decides to kick Hal in the face.

"BAUFF!!!" he blurts, flying backwards. Lenny hits the edge of the kitchen island hard. Maggie elbows him in the ribs and he doubles over in pain. She spins free and launches the pickle jar at Hal's head. When it hits, she hears a dry, crunchy sound and his head pops right off. *Right off!* It's an economy-size jar of pickles, sure, but this still strikes Maggie as being somewhat out of the ordinary.

"The hell?" Maggie asks no one in particular. She turns back to Lenny. "What the hell?" she asks him, pointing at Hal's headless body, which is still standing by the front door. Black goey crap squirts out of the neck stump.

"Awww, man! You killed Hal!" Lenny moans as he rubs his ribs. Hal's body catches up with the situation and flops over.

* *Red Dawn* was the first movie released with a PG-13 rating. For some reason I always thought it was *Dreamscape*, and when I looked it up on The Internet, I discovered I was absolutely incorrect.

The black gooey crap, Maggie notes, gets all over the carpet. Time to skedaddle. She takes a step towards the door and sees three more firemen approaching the trailer.

“What’s taking you guys so long?” one calls out.

“Let’s burn burn burn,” says another.

“Move it, turdherders,” barks the third. He snaps his gloved fingers in a hurry-up motion.

Maggie realizes she’s trapped, and is fairly certain she can’t un-trap herself. Lenny picks up Hal’s ax and moves towards her. The three firemen crowd the doorway. She watches the flames move from the curtains to her bookshelf. The situation seems generally negative.

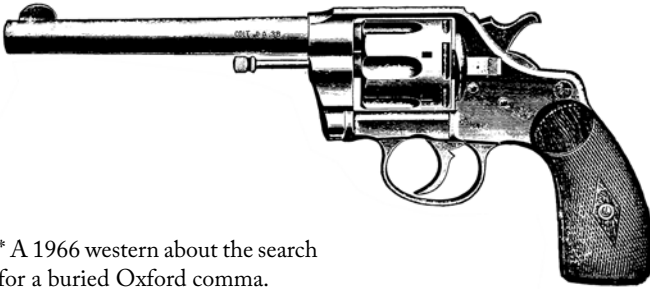
Then Maggie hears yelling outside.

Then Maggie hears gunshots.



CRAZY ALICE

Crazy Alice is a poorly-built firearm more likely to hit a little bit of everything than a lot of something specific. Remember that scene in *The Good, The Bad And The Ugly** where Tuco assembles a reliable revolver by picking and choosing parts from a selection of guns? This is the gun the shopkeeper built out of his rejected parts. In a few pages, Cowboy will lose this old Colt forever, and he won't care because it doesn't mean all that much to him. I feel the same way about my toaster oven and my Hulu account.



* A 1966 western about the search for a buried Oxford comma.

BEFORE THE FIRST BODY HITS THE GROUND, Cowboy is through the doorway. In one fluid movement, he rolls over the recently punctured body of one fireman and swivels back to put a bullet into the face mask of a second. The report of his big revolver reverberates through the smoke-filled trailer. Dropping himself into the midst of the enemy, he spins on his heel, grabs Maggie by the arm, and propels them both past Lenny, whose swinging ax catches nothing but smoke. Cowboy throws himself over the kitchen counter and drags Maggie after him. They hit the peel-n-stick linoleum tiles hard.

“Stay down!” the cowboy commands. Maggie flattens herself against her cabinet doors, eyes wide, the big gun sounds still in her ears.

“Who the heck was that?” asks the fireman still standing in the doorway. The two bodies flanking him crumple to the floor — one with a hole in the front, one with a hole in the back.

Lenny begins to say: “He was like, a cowboy dude or—” but before he can finish, the very same cowboy dude inserts a bullet into the back of Len’s helmet. He lets out a confused “glurk” and falls over dead, too. The remaining member of the Department decides it’s in his best interest to run like hell, so he does.

“You awlright?” Cowboy asks Maggie.

“What are you doing here?”

“Passed a fire truck on the highway. Gut feeling. Knew these bastards were up to no good. They’re like wet dogs at a parlor social.”

“They—” she begins. “I—” She peeks over the counter top. Out the front window, she sees Mrs. Larkin’s trailer engulfed in flames. “I knocked one of their heads off with a jar of pickles,” she whispers.

“Yeah. Demons are like that. They’re sorta brittle.”

What? “What?” she asks. *What did he say?* “What did you say?” Near her front door, only black ooze and empty firefighting gear remain. The firemen’s bodies have disappeared. Like, poof. *Ta-DA!*

“What the hell is this?” she demands. They flinch at the sound of gunfire. “And what the shit is a parlor social?”

“Just put these fires out and sit tight,” he reassures her, hunkering down near her front window. “We’ve got a plan.”

“We?” Maggie asks, remembering the little spaceman. She grabs the smoking chair cushion and douses it in the kitchen sink. “He’s out there? W—with them?”

“Relax. I’m covering him,” the cowboy explains. “He’s proolly almost done. Just hang onto something.”

“Hang on?” she repeats. “What’s your plan, Cowboy?”

The cowboy offers her a lopsided grin. “He’s hooking



your trailer up to our van,” he says, miming a hooking-up action. He is pretty sure his plan is genius. “It’s the only way I reckoned we could get you outta here without getting killed.”

“Wait, you can’t ju—”

“Now, relax. Everything’s under control. We’re gonna roll out of here in just a few—”

“Cowboy, this trailer doesn’t have any *wheels*,” she says.

The cowboy bites his lip and stares at the floor.



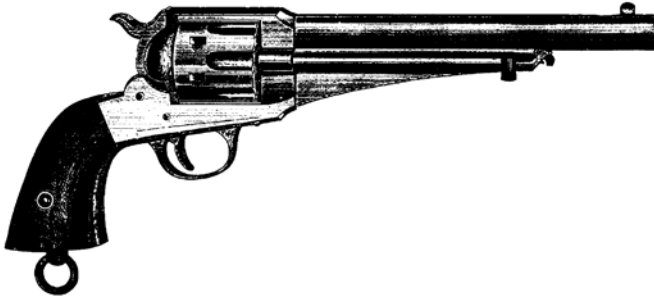
CHAINS HASTILY ATTACHED, the spaceman jumps back into the relative safety of the van, tossing Cowboy’s big revolver Old Jake onto the dashboard. He shifts ‘er into gear and hits the gas. With a decisive, jarring lurch, the spaceman sets the cowboy’s escape plan into motion. It concludes one second later, as Spaceman’s helmet ricochets off the steering wheel. The back tires spin to a halt in Maggie’s half-frozen flower bed. Spaceman suspects the plan is not going all that well.

“Son of a—” yelps the cowboy, teetering backwards as Crazy Alice flies out of his hand. Maggie tumbles forward and ends up under her coffee table. The entirety of her material wealth shifts approximately two feet to the right and smashes to the floor. The trailer’s frame buckles as it slides off its cinderblock foundation. With a burst of sparks, the main power line is severed from the circuit breaker box. The trailer goes dark, except for the burning stuff, which is now burning other stuff.

“Cowboy!” Maggie barks as she tosses the coffee table aside. “Door!” He regains his footing just in time to get tackled by a fireman rushing in. Cowboy hits the floor hard, gloved hands clamped around his throat.

“Gnurg,” Cowboy chokes. He’s in a sour mood.

Maggie grabs a lamp and charges across the room,



OLD JAKE

Old Jake once put a riverboat on the bottom of the Mississippi with one shot to the hull. Old Jake is the gun that gave Half-Dick Richard his nickname. Old Jake once killed a mockingbird. Old Jake killed every member of the 1990s boy band “Take 5” at a mall food court in Orlando, Florida, only to later discover it was a group of impersonators cashing in on the band’s fame, which was a common occurrence at that time. One night in San Pedro, Old Jake shot a 1991 Chevy Lumina graveyard-dead. Old Jake once shot a woman doing the Sunday New York Times crossword puzzle because she kept asking if anyone knew what a “zabaglione” was. Old Jake once launched a mouse spaceship into orbit. From 1984 to 1986, Old Jake was the host of a Tuesday morning AM call-in talk radio show about consumer rights.

Old Jake was once sent into the distant future and planted in an “Old West” museum exhibit by a master thief. While attempting to steal a valuable super-diamond from the Rare Jewel Room, the master thief led security guards on a wild goose chase through the museum, ultimately turning on them in the Old West exhibit previously mentioned, wielding Old Jake. “That ancient relic can’t hurt us,” declared one of the guards, who had been shooting laser pistols since he was a wee lad. Old Jake obliterated the left side of his face. The remaining guards were frightened by the loud report, unaccustomed as they were to combustion-based conflict, and ran away. The master thief escaped, and the ancient Remington was later returned to its rightful era.

Old Jake once held up a cactus.

bringing it down on the back of the fireman's neck. With an extremely satisfying crunch, he folds and hits the floor. "They *are* brittle," she says, impressed by her own strength.

"Well, yeah!" the cowboy croaks in an I-told-you-so tone. He rubs his throat. "I think he ruptured my grawlix." Cowboy turns his attention to retrieving his revolver, which has been lost somewhere amongst Maggie's burning belongings. He kicks at a nearby pile of laundry. Sneaker. Can of cat food. Remote control. Pillow on fire. "Where's my goddamned gun?" he grumbles, as if her housekeeping is to blame.

Maggie reaches over her toppled refrigerator and grabs a carton off the floor. She pours almond milk on the burning couch. It is an ineffective gesture.

"SPAAACEMAAAAN!" Cowboy hollers at the wall.

"I hear you, I hear you," Spaceman mutters in the cab of the van. There are five or maybe sixteen firemen taking cover across the access road, not yet aware that the spaceman is an absolutely terrible shot. He squeezes off another round from Old Jake, taking a fist-sized chunk out of a nearby tree. He floors the accelerator again and the van stalls out. "Oh, crackers."

"Here," Cowboy calls to Maggie across the increasingly smoke-filled trailer. "If any more of those sonsabitches try and come in, jab at 'em with this." He tosses her a broom. "I gotta find the goddamned gun."

"I'm fighting them with a friggin' broom?" she asks. *What kind of rescuer is this guy? What good will a broom do against a murderous group of psychos dressed up as firemen? Did he say 'demons' before or what?* She grasps the broom handle tighter. With her trusted pickle jar gone, she decides it is her new best friend.

"Aim for their eyes," Cowboy informs her, his attention turned back to the goddamned gun search. "They hate that."



THE TWO FIREMEN CROUCH behind the bullet-ridden tree. “Think we should go charging in?” Doug asks Denny.

“Go for it, Rambo,” Denny says. “I’m good here.”

“The Chief is gonna get mad if we don’t kill everybody. He hates it when we don’t live up to our evil potential.”

Denny shrugs. “I hope that little dude quits shooting at our tree soon.”

Doug clucks quietly while he ponders the situation. “Awlright,” he declares, coming to a decision. “Let’s grab the gas cans from the truck.”

“Yeah!” Denny cries. “We’re firemen!”

“Yeah!” Doug agrees. “We’re freakin’ *firemen*.....





let's just
torch the
place."

FREE RIDE'S OVER, CHAMP!

THE END

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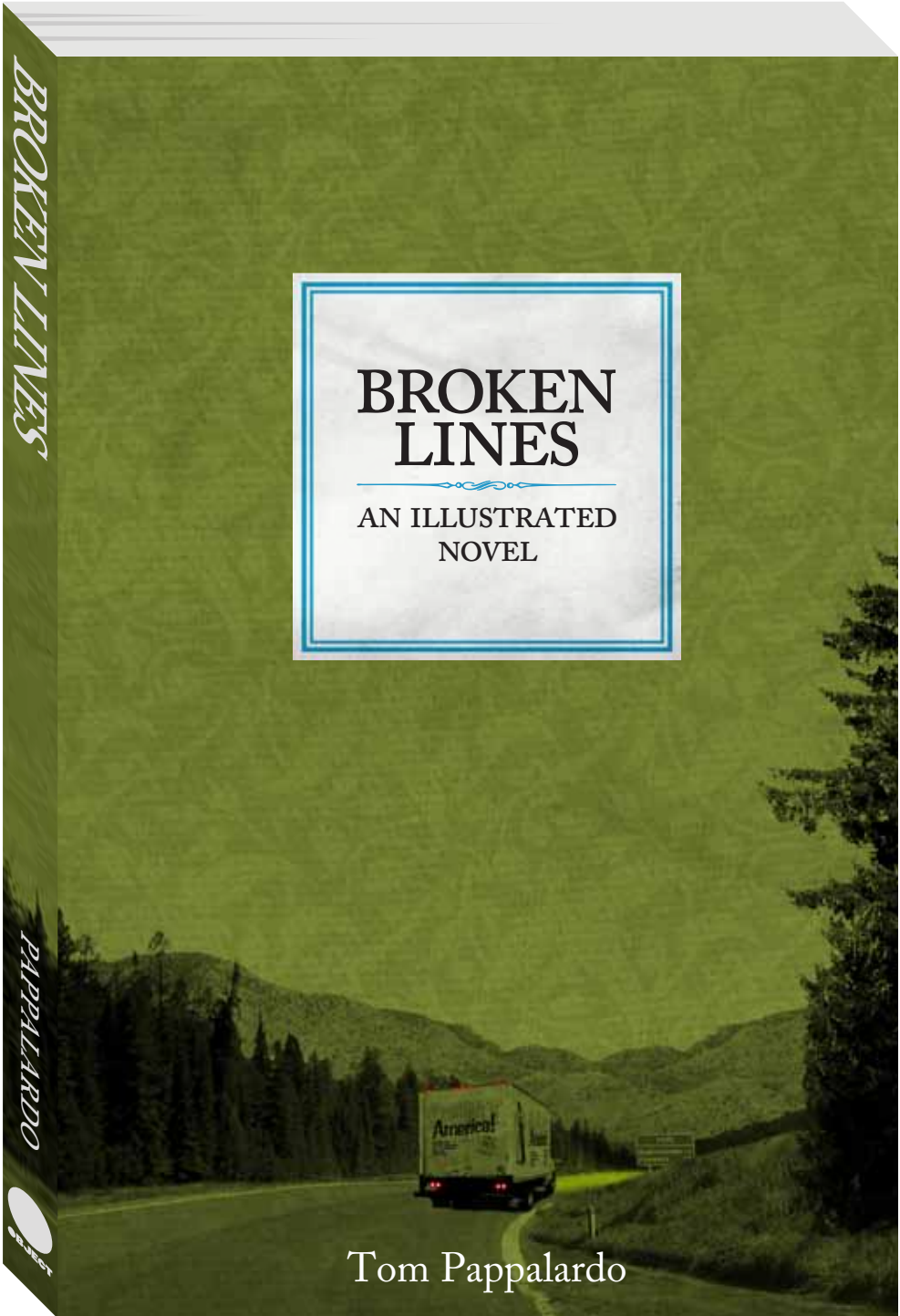
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Tom Pappalardo is a graphic designer,
writer, cartoonist, and musician. He lives
in Western Massachusetts with a little cat
named Charlie.



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“I think the van’s busted,” Spaceman says. “Those dashboard lights were blinking.”

“What lights?”

“The the uh...” He paddles the air with his hand. “What do they call ‘em? Dummy lights.”

The cowboy takes a deep breath. “Well, what did they *say*?”

“I don’t know. They’re dummy lights.”

When demons burn a waitress’s life to the ground, she squeezes into a stolen rental van with a cowboy, a spaceman, and an elderly vampire, embarking on a journey of evil-fighting and bad road coffee. As her past recedes in the rearview, questions arise:

- *What happens when a vampire decides to stop drinking blood?*
- *How long should one irradiate an apple pie in a convenience store microwave?*
- *Are all demons this brittle?*
- *Is there a **DUNK-A-DONUT** near here?*

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