

One Last Kill

by
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Chapter 1

Milk jugs. Thousands of milk jugs cluttered a working Tennessee cow farm, making a stately ruin of the otherwise barren locale. What started as a hobby grew to be regarded as art, then moved to the level of obsession, and now bordered on detritus. Nonetheless, hordes of tourists and aficionados of roadside oddities made pilgrimage to see the largest collection of milk containers in the United States.

Octogenarian Benjamin Kilgore had amassed a spectacular collection of cardboard, metal, ceramic, glass, wood and plastic milk containers. He boasted a vessel of some sort from every decade in which milk had been commercially produced and distributed. Alongside traditional bottles, Kilgore kept his prized individually fashioned and artistic representations as well.

Over fifty-seven acres of land served as a living shrine to the cow, milk and assorted dairy products. No space, horizontal or otherwise, went unused. Kilgore had bottles, cartons, glasses and boxes stacked, hung and displayed all across the property. Driving by the farm alone provided a virtual museum experience. Paying customers were treated to a self-guided tour, which went through every room of the house, even the family bathroom, where milk bottles held a variety of functional purposes, then to the basement, attic, the barn, garage and horse stable. Yellow, blue and red glass jugs formed lily pads and decorated an otherwise swampy pond.

Some school children from the community made cow sculptures and other monuments from broken and damaged canisters. Kilgore wrote, "I've got milk" on the hillside in the large milk vats once carried on dairy delivery trucks of days gone by.

It had been a slow October day. Kilgore felt a sharp sense of uneasiness at the distinct sound of city soled shoes clacking across his front porch. A quick glance at the clock revealed fifteen minutes remained before closing time. Another visitor, another gladly earned dollar, he thought. So, he uprooted himself from his well-worn rocking chair and went to greet the day's final guests.

Chapter 2

Two guys who were not accompanied by women or kids didn't appear terribly out of the ordinary, but these guys did not look like a couple, or the sort of middle class folks who frequented bizarre attractions. Jeans exceeded the dress code of the quirky roadside stop, and Khakis all but branded the wearers as out of town tourists. These guys were dressed smartly and were well-heeled. The shoes Kilgore had heard clacking on the porch probably cost more than he had taken in over the last three weeks. Something here bespoke of peculiar at best.

“Evening!” Kilgore said with all due southern hospitality. “Welcome to the Milk Farm.”

No return greeting came from the men.

“How’d you hear about us?”

“I found you on the Internet,” the thinner of the two men answered.

“I never piddle around on the computer myself; nevertheless I count it as a good thing. Some online Samaritan sure steers a lot of traffic my way. Normally, the tour costs four dollars. Most people start in the house. No rooms are off limits, but in fairness I’m closing up shop soon. I’ll only charge you half price and you can mill around outside as long as you like.”

“A tour is not necessary.”

“Oh,” Kilgore said curiously.

“I have reason to believe you can help me with a specific matter,” the smaller man said, “You see, my father delivered milk as a boy. I remember he had a small collection of bottles. After he passed away the bottles, like so many other keepsakes, sort of got lost in the shuffle of family members and countless moves. I hope you might have one or two you’d sell me so I can recreate his collection.”

“In what part of the country did your daddy live?”

“He was from Evansville, Illinois. It’s just outside of Chicago.”

That gave Kilgore reason to pause.

“Do you by chance know the name of the dairy where your father worked?” the old man asked.

“Yes sir, his employer was the Windy Lake Dairy.”

Kilgore paused again as if rapidly shuffling through his mental file cabinet of inventoried items.

“I don’t know if you’ll count it as good luck or bad.”

“I beg your pardon,” the visitor asked.

“I believe I have bottles that fit the bill, but I’m a collector,” Kilgore said. “I don’t sell anything.”

“Not even from one collector to another?”

“I’ll direct you to the bottles that you seek. You can take all the pictures you want, but that’s all I’ll allow to leave the property.”

Chapter 3

A short walk around the side of the house led to a quasi-altar. Kilgore stopped and looked on with great reverence at a structure set apart from others on the grounds by a lean-to covering it from the elements.

“Incredible!” the tourist said. “You really do have them. I have many times figured I’d never be fortunate enough or live long enough to see these treasures again.”

“Your memory serves you well, friend. I don’t know of any others like these in existence. They’re treasures indeed.”

“May I?” the man asked, indicating he’d like to handle the artifacts.

“I have no doubt you’ll exercise all due caution,” Kilgore said, with an approving nod. “What’s your name, friend?”

“Bradley,” he replied, not clarifying if that was his given name or surname. Kilgore didn’t ask, but not for lack of interest. Much about this fellow seemed interesting. Kilgore knew that for sure, and more.

Bradley held one of three unusual glass milk jars. Shaped like a water carafe, all of them had a slight hourglass curve and a wide opening. None of the three had a lid. Each sparkled as the man held them in turn to the setting sunlight. Childlike enthusiasm filled the collector as he inspected the three glass milk bottles. All the while, his hulking companion maintained a stark composure. Kilgore carefully noted the demeanor of both men and scrutinized their every movement, gesture and the clear communication being conveyed via their eyes. His curiosity heightened.

“I’d leave you to enjoy the collection, except I feel confident that as much as you value the jugs, they are not the primary motivation of your visit.”

A rigidity paralyzed the silent partner while a look of respect and admiration befell the collector.

“I’m sorry,” the well-dressed Bradley said.

“It’s the bottles,” Kilgore replied curtly.

“Yes, they’re treasures, indeed.”

“And?”

“I expected you to be savvy enough to catch on, but just in case I decided to provide the trail of crumbs. Of course now I feel a tad foolish. I guess I should have made my case straightaway or at least attempted to fabricate a more compelling lie.”

“What is it you seek?” Kilgore asked.

“I want the bottles,” he said.

“We’ve established they’re a treasure of sorts,” Kilgore said. “My eighty plus years on this Earth have taught me when a man comes for something of this magnitude; he wants more than a trophy.”

“So it’s not a cliché that wisdom comes with age. Tell me, Milk Sage, what do I seek?”

“Finality. Retribution.”

“Your wisdom is not faulty, old man. I do want the bottles and I do have a debt to settle, but first I need you to answer a couple of questions.”

“You came all this way for answers to questions,” Kilgore clarified.

“Yes, I want the bottles and I’d like to know what it was like,” he said. “When did you first know? How did it feel to make your first kill?”

Chapter 4

Kilgore turned and casually moseyed back into the farm house. His nefarious visitors followed. He made no attempt to answer any question posed to him. He just walked. Neither man spoke or tried to stop him. Bradley kept hold of the milk bottles and kept lock step. Once inside, Kilgore eased into a rocker covered by an ornate quilt and adjusted a swollen throw pillow behind his back. Bradley and his partner stood towering over Kilgore.

“My father cherished these,” Bradley said, referring to the milk bottles. “If only he could know I have retrieved them.”

“You can take the tour--truthfully I’d just as well have you take your leave--but let’s be clear. The bottles stay.”

“Moxie. Wow, do you have moxie,” Bradley said. “Let’s be clear on this--I give the directions and you follow. Here are my instructions, since you seemed to be confused. I stay. You talk. You die, and I leave with my father’s milk bottles, in that order.”

“Given your plan is to kill me in every set of circumstances, what do you say we skip straight to the good part?”

“I considered your bravado when making my plan, but hoped to avoid it.”

“Truth is not always a path to freedom.”

“I’ll make that determination,” Bradley said. “Talk!”

“I first knew I wanted to be a dairy farmer as a little kid. I must confess that fulfilling a childhood dream is a goal to which all should aspire.”

“Good advice. I’m living out a lifelong goal at this very moment. I have one last thing left to do,” Bradley said coolly. “I’ll get to it after you tell me about your first kill.”

Kilgore remained ensconced in his rocking chair. He openly stared at the milk bottles that Bradley had placed on a bookshelf that spilled over with magazines and paperback novels.

“Man alive, did your dad love those bottles. You know, I knew your father since grade school. He delivered milk in a wooden pull-behind wagon as a boy. Pretty soon he graduated to toting a basket on his bike. For reasons unknown to anyone, he loved the milk business. I guess you know he even had favorite bottles for sweet milk, buttermilk and chocolate milk. The sweet were his favorites overall.”

Kilgore looked forward without locking eyes with either man as he spoke. Bradley’s face showed clear distain. His partner maintained a detached gaze.

“When your father first offered to buy some of the bottles, his boss, old man Poteet, gave the boy two jugs for free. They were chipped and long out of use, not at all like the ones like your dad wanted. After a spell, and a fair amount of nagging from your pop, Poteet sold the desired bottles to him at a greatly reduced price. Little did the Milk Man know he had made a life long loyal employee that day.

“Your dad built a shrine from those bottles like they were the great gods of Egypt. Most people agreed that he loved the bottles more than he ever loved women. In fact, it wasn’t until he got laid by your Aunt Lydia that he even showed interest in the opposite sex.”

“Shut your nasty mouth!” Bradley demanded.

Kilgore adjusted the pillow at his back and read a look of surprise on the face of Bradley’s partner. Bradley followed the old man’s gaze. Kilgore added more fuel to the embers he had just stoked.

“Oh, you didn’t know that little factoid, did you? Your daddy had a thing for your mother’s sister. Truth is, it never went away. We all knew, even your ma.”

“I didn’t ask you for my family history. I came here to for you to tell me about your first kill.”

“Perhaps you should calm down and give me a minute,” Kilgore said, “If you’ll wait patiently, time will show that my discussion of your father and my first kill share many commonalities. Shall I continue, or have you heard enough and we can get on with the business you came here to conduct?”

“I’m not a fan of prolonged prose. Get to the point.”

“Context is a must,” Kilgore said. “Your pops and I knew each other from way back. We palled around until we graduated from high school. Both of us went straight to work. He got on full time at the dairy with Poteet, and I began running errands for Colby.”

“You collected for him.”

“No, lawd no. Time for paying debts had long passed by the time I came for a visit,” Kilgore said. “I gathered things of value to go toward the bill and when necessary I cancelled the debt.”

“You were just a kid.”

“A big kid with a lot of anger,” Kilgore corrected.

“So you killed for Colby.”

“Your words.”

“I want to hear your words about the first kill. Was it for Colby, did you do it out of meanness or spite?”

“I don’t let emotion overrule my intellect, never have. Your father knew that about me and he clearly knew what I did and how immediately and effectively I completed my work. Like I said, we went way back. I imagine your dad incorrectly thought I’d have mercy or something of the sort,” Kilgore explained. “When it came time for a visit to his abode, he pooled money from his dad, uncle and claimed your aunt Lydia would cover the remainder of his debt.”

“And you took the money?”

“Of course I did. I took all he had and called on Lydia for the cash and a collection fee.”

“If you got what you came for, plus interest, why did he have to die?” asked Bradley.

“He owed the money, not his bitch. So I came on a follow up visit to get it from your dad. He was empty handed so I confiscated his milk truck and inventory. He never flinched until I reached for those bottles. He flipped out and he rushed me.

Looking on in horror, Bradley surveyed the bottles at his side.

“For the bottles? You killed a man over milk bottles!”

“You keep putting words in my mouth, and worse than that, you’re rushing my story. In these parts we take pride in spinning a tale.”

“I’m not interested in some worn out southern yarn. I want to know how you felt when you first took a human life,” Bradley said irritably.

Kilgore mused blissfully for a spell before he replied, “She was my first and one great love.”

“Describe the kill, not your love affair.”

Kilgore cocked his head to the left and looked very annoyed.

Chapter 5

“You’re wasting time,” Bradley shouted.

“I didn’t realize we were on a schedule,” Kilgore said.

“Tell me about your first kill.”

“I’m trying to, but you keep on being an ass.”

“Get on with the story before I really get annoyed.”

“Fine,” Kilgore said. “When I’d go to collect money, I’d come around and act civilized the whole while. We’d talk and maintain cordial relations before getting to business. I transitioned from pleasantries by opening my briefcase. In the early days I brought a bag. I filled it with different items for various visits. I started out under the misguided suggestion of using oranges, which don’t bruise. I found that, in fact, bruises make for good physical and visible reminders, so I shifted to baseballs. Finally, I took to using hockey pucks. As I recall, it was the pucks I used on your old man,” Kilgore said. “To my surprise, when your pops saw the beating coming he began to act indignant. He would have come out much better without the attitude. I unloaded on him, and that got him killed.”

“So he was your first kill?”

“No, far from it.”

“You bastard! You’re making this all up. I haven’t heard what I want.”

“Interrupting only prolongs the story,” Kilgore said.

“Get to the point,” said Bradley.

“Everybody found a way to pay or ran like hell after spending time with me.

Unlike most, your father became more obstinate afterwards. The next time I came around for a visit, he pulled a knife. I had no choice but to take the blade and hand him another whipping. On this occasion, I filled the bag with golf balls. Unsatisfied with the effect from the golf balls I resorted to the confiscated knife.”

“And you killed him.”

“No, as I pulled the weapon I realized we weren’t alone. What a card! Your dad had bad markers all over the place. Somebody else had come for a piece of his hide. That put me in quite the quagmire.”

“I remember it all so well, the look on his face, the rush of adrenaline. It consumed me. It’s been love ever since.”

“How did you kill him?”

“I didn’t say that I did.”

“What are you doing? I’m tired of your stalling and lying.”

“I’ve been true blue.”

“I know good and well my father wasn’t stabbed to death.”

“There you have it. You don’t want to know about my first kill. You want to know about your father. Everybody’s got daddy issues.”

“I have no meaningful memories of my dad, thanks to you.”

“I’ll give you that. You had your daddy taken from you much too soon. You crave to hear from him what to expect of you, what his hopes and visions were for you in this life, and the biggest question of them all, what do you do without him?”

“I’m doing fine without a father figure. Not having a dad taught me to be brave and to have the courage to deal with you.”

“You aren’t afraid, not of me anyway. The truth is your daddy would have told you not to be afraid. He would have told you to be concerned, to seek a greater awareness, to take precautions. Doing those things don’t add up to pure fear. No, my boy, they make for good common sense.”

“We all have fears. I’ll find yours and it will be the last emotion you recall from this life,” Bradley said.

“I’m terrified already,” Kilgore said. “I fear you’ll talk me to death.”

“I know what you’re trying to do. You want me to act on impulse, to get emotionally charged, and to make a mistake. Forget about it. It’s not going to happen.”

“You think too much. I’m tired and I am more than happy to have this be my final stand and take my rest.”

“Stop with the convoluted talk. There’s not a chance on the planet that you can take my power or change the course of the day. I’ll do what I came to do, to honor my family and satisfy myself. There’s no stopping that.”

“Good God, son. You must have spent a thousand hours in therapy and three times that in dollars to have learned all that head talk jargon.”

“No, I just prepared for this moment in every fashion imaginable.”

“Then once again I invite you to conduct your business,” Kilgore implored.

“My rules,” Bradley restated.

“How about if I turn hostile or pretend to be scared and wet my pants?”

“Talk,” Bradley insisted. “Only about your first kill and tell me now. No more bunny trails.”

Chapter 6

“I don’t want to hear about my father, love or milk bottles. That’s not related to my question to you,” and infuriated Bradley barked.

“I must tell you, in all honesty, I think my storytelling days have drawn to an end anyhow. It’s your game, and I’m ready to get about our business. But, if you’ve lost the taste for what you came for now that you have seen I’m a man well advanced in age with all the ailments befitting my former lifestyle, and am best left to suffer at the hands of time, then by all means be on your way.”

“I came here with a purpose. It’s not like I just happened to end up here after I set out for a drive this morning! I’ve tracked your elusive ass for decades.”

“Impressive.”

“You’ll see how impressive I can be, and sooner rather than later.”

“Fine by me. Go ahead and finish it,” Kilgore demanded.

“We’ll get to it. I promise you that,” he said, and pulled out a handgun.

“You don’t need that thing,” Kilgore said. “We both knew all along that you had a gun and we played our roles accordingly. Brandishing your weapon in a threatening manner is such a street thing to do and it embarrasses us both. Put it away.”

“I said I want to hear about your first kill,” he insisted, pistol in hand.

“Do you plan to shoot me anyway?” Kilgore asked.

“Yes.”

“Okay, what the hell,” he acquiesced.

Chapter 7

“Oh so many, there have been so so many. How do I chronicle the beauty of the thing?”

“Start from the beginning.”

Before Kilgore launched into a missive about his past, he and his unwanted guests were interrupted.

“Clang, clang, clang,” a rapid succession of noises came from the front of the house. Both of the stiffs jerked toward the racket.

“It’s the cow bell I have on the porch,” Kilgore explained. “It’s probably neighborhood kids. They come around and I let them build stuff in the yard with the milk bottles. I’ll go send them away.”

Kilgore stood from his seat, only be shoved back in place by Bradley.

“Ah. Ah. Ah. Not so quick. I know better than that. I’ll take care of this.”

“We’re men with grave concerns of men at hand,” Kilgore said. “They are but children. Let them be.”

“So we find something the killer cares for at last.”

“It’s not the kids. I have a code and I live by it.”

“A code?”

“If I killed children, you wouldn’t be here now.”

“Point well taken,” Bradley said.

Kilgore stood. His movement rattled Bradley.

“Sit,” Bradley demanded.

“I thought we had an understanding,” said Kilgore. “I’m going to send whoever is at the door on their way.”

“No. Too much could go wrong. I’ll take care of this. Don’t worry, I’ll tell them we’re in a meeting and come another time. Someone will need to discover your body. How grand it will be for your adoring fans.”

Two steps and he stopped and spoke firmly, “When I return you *will* talk. I have no further patience for your tomfoolery.”

“Fair enough.”

Once the man had moved beyond earshot Kilgore shook his head and repeated, “Tomfoolery? Who says that? No one even used that word when I was a kid. Your boss is a dork.”

Silence followed.

“You don’t say much,” Kilgore remarked. “Boss-man not allow it?”

No response.

“So which one are you, Daryl or Daryl?”

Not even a smile or a look of confusion marked the face of the bulky man.

“When this is over I think I’ll keep you around. You make a mighty fine lap dog,” said Kilgore. “But you must not be worth much because your boss-man didn’t even trust your competence to send children away from the door.”

“If it were up to me this would have been over long ago and we’d be half way back to Illinois,” He said, breaking his long silence.

“Pragmatic. I love that in a man,” Kilgore mocked. “What’s say we end this and let life get on its way. What’s there to lose beyond a lashing from the master?”

“I’m no man’s bitch. I’ll take great pleasure in this.”

“You seem nervous. Is this your first time?” Kilgore mocked as he eased out of his rocker. “There’s no shame in being a virgin. Everybody was once.”

“Shut up milk man. I’m not psychologically wrapped up in this shit. I’m itching to dust you.”

“Dust and tomfoolery? I may never get my head around the language of your generation. So tell me, is ‘dust’ what you kids are calling it nowadays?”

Chapter 8

Bradley heard the thud from the porch and immediately knew his partner's temper had gotten the best of him. He raced back to find a limp body with blood pooling around it.

"Damn it!" he yelled. Bradley assessed the situation. He looked at the blood covering Kilgore and clenched his fists and jaw. This was not the plan. He wanted to fly into an angry fit, but he had to salvage what he could of his mission.

"I had heard you had a history of holding a knife, my father's I believe. Shame on me for not telling him," Bradley said, gazing down at his deceased partner. "I'll take the blade now."

"Sure. It'll go nicely with the milk bottles you're stealing from me," Kilgore said, and slid the short pearl handled knife, which looked more like a letter opener, out of his sleeve. As he pulled it out he pinched the blade between his shirt using his index finger and thumb to clean the blood from the tip. His instant polish of the steel plating gave off a slight twinkle.

Kilgore shuffled into the kitchen to wash his hands. He toweled them dry and then got a squirt of hand sanitizer, "It's always best to fault on the side of good hygiene."

"You are acting like you just came in from gardening."

"Nice example. It's about the same."

"Let's get back to your story," said Bradley.

"Wow, you are an insensitive one. You made no reaction whatsoever to your friend," Kilgore said.

"He's not a friend."

"Sure he is. You would only bring someone you trust into this sort of predicament."

"Maybe I hired him."

"Even with all the unusual deviant ads I hear they have on Craig's List, I bet there's not one looking for an accomplice to a blood thirsty asshole carrying a life long vendetta to kill an old man."

"What's it to you?"

"Nothing more than a clear signal that you didn't plan well. If losing your pal happened, I wonder what will go awry next?"

"I didn't plan on you having a death wish."

"Tell me, how did you see this coming together?" Kilgore asked smugly.

"I ask the questions," he retorted.

"So you say. In the meantime shall we at least cover your fallen comrade out of respect?"

"Respect?!" Bradley repeated. "You're schizophrenic. First you act like you want to die, then you ruthlessly kill a man and now you want to lecture me about concern for friends and respect for the departed."

"I'd cover him up if he had been my pal. If you want we can bury him out on the farm. I have found that human remains make for good fertilizer," Kilgore said. "I buried

your father and a good number of your family members in your grandmother's table garden for that very reason."

"You disgust me."

"I'm being sincere. Nothing ripens tomatoes like..."

"Fuck you!" Bradley barked. Once again he unholstered his pistol. He pressed the barrel to Kilgore's cheek. Calmness of age or nerves carved from the street, the old man showed no emotion. He held his head firmly against the pressed steel. Bradley pushed the gun into Kilgore's flesh harder.

"If you shoot, the bullet will go straight through my mouth. I imagine it will hardly hurt more than biting my tongue. Human jowls are made of thin membranes. It won't even bleed much"

Bradley repositioned the gun to the base of Kilgore's chin.

"Perhaps this angle will allow the bullet to rattle around in your brain for a while. Wonder if that will hurt or bleed?"

"You ate the tomatoes, didn't you?"

Chapter 9

"You...." Bradley couldn't find the words. He brandished his gun and pushed Kilgore back into the rocker.

"Your family took me for the killer and talked huffy all over town. They left me with no choice but to silence them one and all."

"Go ahead; reminisce about killing my father and uncles. I hope you have the same satisfied look on your face when you finish," a fuming Bradley said.

"I'm not the Billy the Kid you make me out to be. I did make the choice to run with some real bad assess," Kilgore said. "But as for me. I wouldn't make a chapter of a serial killer book. I barely broke double digits."

"Numbers are for accountants. The fact remains that you're a callous killer."

"It's a fact you can bank on that I stirred many serpents and called it a rite of passage."

"You sound so proud of the thug you have always been."

"No shame in being good at something and enjoying what you do. You asked, so here it is. It's like love, that's how it felt and it did every single time." Kilgore recalled. "I have often imagined that death has a sweetness of its own, not like the love of the kill, but something special. So let's do what must be done."

"I'll introduce you to the sweetness of death soon enough. First I need you to know how what you did, and called love, ruined the lives of people. God knows how many families you've wrecked."

"What are we doing here?" Kilgore asked calmly. "Am I to reflect remorsefully, to feel guilt, to find a conscience here in the dark hours of life?"

"No, I think you have no compassion. It's your passion for killing I want to better comprehend."

"Read a book."

"I have the best potential author in the world at my discretion," Bradley said.

"If I had any intention of penning a book, it would have been done long by now."

"Being obstinate is wearing me thin."

“You want to hear what you think you’re supposed to hear. Somehow you think that listening to my recollection will make something better, validate your hatred and bitterness.”

“Old man, I want to hear you talk, but this ain’t it.”

“What do you want to know? Do you want to hear about saltiness the saliva takes on in your mouth? Do you want to know if I found the pure joy in the victory of life over death? Sure I did. It was like I had the option of giving life, but instead handed out death like Halloween candy. Now you can fill in the rest of the script for this after school special.”

Chapter 10

Bradley looked on dumbfounded for some time. Kilgore imagined that mentally the younger man was flipping through his mental catalog, trying to decide where to go from here.

“What do you say we take a walk out on the farm?” Kilgore suggested.

“Now you’re stalling. Thought you were prepared to come face to face to with God,” Bradley said.

“I am,” Kilgore reassured. “But it would a sight nicer to do so out in the midst of the natural world.”

“I’m in no mood to meet any of your requests.”

“How about accepting a drink? Are you in the mood for that?”

“No.”

“If I can’t be on the farm when I go out to rest, at least I should have one last drink.”

“Go ahead, maybe it’ll loosen your lips. Have at it.”

“What can I get you?” Kilgore asked his assailant.

“I don’t drink.”

“Very disciplined.”

“I had to be to bring this to fruition.”

“Fruition, much better word.”

Kilgore poured a vodka, neat.

“Sure I can’t get you something?” Kilgore asked.

“Talk.”

“It’s a shame you won’t accept a tour. I spent years planning the layout of this place. I made as much of it as possible visible from the road,” Kilgore said, took a sip from his highball glass, and blotted the corner of his mouth with a handkerchief he held at the ready. “I don’t mean it as a free sample to whet an appetite, but I try to allow the farm itself to bare witness to the splendor of life.”

“I think that drink messed up your breathing, old man. I’m positive you’re oxygen deprived and in the middle of a stroke.”

“Come again.”

“You have long stopped making sense,” Bradley said.

“You’d think being your father’s son you get this. It’s obvious. Milk is tantamount to life’s blood. We all drink it. Milk is essential for everyone, from babies to aging women.”

“Whoa, you *are* out there!” Bradley said.

“Me?! Can you imagine the first person who saw a calf feeding on a nasty dangling utter and thought, *Wonder what that tastes like?* Better yet, imagine the first person he convinced to drink it. *Here try this. I got it out of the teat of the cow.*”

“You’re a self-righteous bastard for sure. Look at this shit hole. I’ve seen gangland graffiti in Chicago that held deeper meaning than this heap.”

“I can’t force you or anyone else to come here, to pay or take the tour. The fact is this place makes life interesting. People who come here get a sense of Americana through an unusual medium. Just by visiting people become interesting and unusual themselves. My farm imparts that on the tourists as they tell the tale of how they spent their time here.”

“Did you come up with that, or is that the blurb in the AAA book?”

“I kid you not. My farm and all the other odd ball sites are destinations for pilgrimage. You yourself have come here on a pilgrimage. Perhaps it’s not me you seek, but something more.”

“I know what I’m looking for in this life. Oh great sage, tell me this; what’s your pilgrimage?”

“I’ve seen a great many of natural and man made wonders, some more moving than others, and gazed on artistic renderings such as the towers of Sabato Rodia in Watts, Clarence Schmidt’s alleyways in Woodstock and the gardens of Howard Finster in Summerville.”

“You can save that for the public television introspective on artistic garbage men. I don’t give a flip about your piss ant farm. Quit wasting time and recount your initial killing visit.”

“For what purpose?”

“Purpose? You question me about purpose,” Bradley said. “Look at you. Your whole life you have been ripping people off. First you robbed families of their fathers, brothers and sons then you moved on to charge people to walk around in a junk yard.”

“Ain’t that America?!”

“Why am I surprised that you revel in scamming people?” Bradley asked. “I’m the true Sir Galahad, on a quest to right a wrong of life.”

“Galahad, a late literary addition to the legend, and a betrayer at that. Nice analogy, though. It suits you.”

“How so?” asked Bradley.

“Your trek to find me is not about upholding life. It testifies to the ultimate vanity of vaunting human ambition. You’re trying to annihilate what you don’t understand.”

“I made it clear from the get go, I came here first and foremost to understand. I want to know about the kill, your first kill,” Bradley clearly stated.

“No, you want me to make your life better, to rewrite the past and script a new future. Can’t be done, not today.”

Chapter 11

“How about we take that stroll around the property if all we are going to do is talk?” Kilgore suggested, again. “The view is much better. I have several pieces I’m sure you will appreciate.”

“I have caught sight of all I want to see.” He looked at the trio of containers on the table close to his hand.

“Yes, those are works of art. In fact, your father’s bottles are the genesis of this entire collection. Are you sure you don’t want to see the Bradley born of your heirlooms?” Kilgore asked.

“I think not! Nice ruse to get me out in the open so you can signal for help, run or pull some shenanigan.”

“You are some wordsmith,” Kilgore said.

“I didn’t come here to lecture, debate or wax poetically. I came to hear what you have to say.” Bradley said. He jabbed the nozzle of his gun into Kilgore’s shoulder blade with stealth and brute force.

“Ouch!”

“Nice, huh? No bruising, bleeding, no nausea or grogginess to impede you from talking, but enough pain to ensure that I have your attention.”

“Yes, I’ll admit that was nice,” Kilgore said. “I liked it. Finally, I’m noticing meaningful forethought in your action plan. I reckon I’ll tell you the rest of the story.

“I spent most of my days as a kid and an adult fooling myself with the notion that I had control over life--my life, and that of others. I conned myself into believing that I decided who lived and died. You do that long enough and you’ll learn that we have no control, none at all. Life is as serendipitous as fate itself,” Kilgore said. “When it’s time to die, it’s time.”

“I find it hard to believe that you would let your time to die arrive without taking the opportunity to nostalgically relive your first kill, that defining moment in your life.”

“Is that what you think? You haven’t studied me close enough. I was what I am long before I dropped a body to prove it,” Kilgore said.

“Pray tell, why do what you do?”

“Love of something more. My great love in life is associated with killing. I’ll give you that, but it was far more than the act itself.”

“Did you learn that in a self-help seminar?” Bradley asked.

“No matter what I say it won’t make killing me any easier. My words won’t keep the memories at bay, stop the flashbacks or abate the nightmares,” Kilgore paused. “You see it’s not the law that keeps people from killing, it’s living with it after the kill.”

“I know I can live with it.”

“Good on you then. Taking a life is not for everyone and more times than not it leaves a bad taste in your mouth. See if it’s what you hoped,” Kilgore said, and spread his arms wide.

“Killing has been good to me so far.”

“Am I supposed to believe you took another man’s life, really?” Kilgore asked dubiously.

“Not just any man, I killed your Jed.”

Bradley’s comments took the desired effect. Kilgore showed a chink in his armor.

“Jed?” Kilgore repeated, while showing little more than the effort to breathe. He worked to manage his movements and expressions..

“Yes, that’s right. I know about your son, Jed. I have been most thorough in my work.”

“So you are disciplined after all.”

“I had a plan and I exercised it,” Bradley boasted.

“I appreciate that in a man. Surely you must know that threats to his well-being hold no currency with me.”

“You’re hearing’s not what it used to be, old man. I expected you to say as much so I wasted no time before executing your son.”

“He didn’t even know I existed,” Kilgore said. “I made sure of that so not to taint or jeopardize his life on my account.”

“You know what they say about the sins of the father,” Bradley said. “No great loss, Jed didn’t amount to much anyhow.”

This time Kilgore showed a twinge of something else. It didn’t come off as rage or even remorse, just a hint of acknowledgement.

“Like you, I killed all the men in a family, yours. Now, I’m down to the final Kilgore. How poetic that I take out the patriarch of the Kilgores in this, my last kill.”

“How fitting,” Kilgore agreed.

“You call me cold. I know all your life’s secrets. I know you are a coldblooded killer. I know you had a clandestine son. I exposed you. I hunted your son and murdered him. I hunted you to meet the same end. You show no anger, remorse, sadness, nothing--hell you never even asked how I know all this or how your son died. You’re a shell of a man.”

“I can’t believe you’ve carried on this long. Most folks would have let it go by now.”

“I tried,” Bradley admitted. “I couldn’t. You haunted me. I had to know. I had to best you.”

“So here we are, a couple of guys with a trauma in their pasts. Are you sure you want to add more?”

“I confess the whole thing seems foolish now that I’m here, especially if I get arrested over this. I think we can agree prison’s no place for a man, but I don’t think I can stand myself if I don’t finish what I started.”

“You’ve wanted to kill me all of your life. While you were day dreaming about murder, I caused countless graves to be dug. Let me assure you, it’s not what you think,” Kilgore said.

“I’m going to have regret or remorse either way. My life, my miserable life has to count for something and you have to know that you’re not untouchable. You are not God.”

“You have really worked yourself over, haven’t you, sonny boy? I’m good with all things in this life and whatever comes next. Do what you’re going to do, but if I process with you any longer I’m going to hurl. I don’t have the stomach for it.”

Chapter 12

“I gather you have no intention of giving me the information I want. So, tell me this then, why did you stop?” Bradley asked.

“Colby hired me to make visits, like I said. My work had more to do with his reputation than it did in getting money. He needed people to know better than to cross him. I made that clear.”

“You said you got the money from my dad and took more.”

“You still haven’t heard the rest of the story,” Kilgore said.

“Do tell.”

“Colby bullied people, made money and flaunted it. When your father died Colby flipped his lid. He scolded me and took me away some of my salary. Then word passed about your dad’s death, and Colby worked it to his advantage. Honestly, I did, too. Afterwards I made more cash per outing. We all got something out of the deal, not to mention that my love blossomed.”

“If you loved it so much, why did you leave it?”

“I lost my taste for all the politics. Though the notion seems simple, you couldn’t just make a kill. People raised issues with manner, method and disposal. Then there was the money thing. I’ve never been a good one at that. All the business aspects took the splendor out of the act itself. So I decided I needed to let a little beauty in my life. I thought it might be nice to leave a meaningful mark on the world rather than a scar.”

“You quit, just like that?”

“I never longed for one last kill. I assumed there wouldn’t be any more, up until your boy there.” Kilgore indicated the dead man who had long bled out lying in the floor.

“Liar.”

“It’s the gospel truth. I loaded the car and put distance between me and Evansville, Colby, and not least of all, killing.”

“You can’t simply leave that lifestyle. It’s not that easy. I think you went rogue.”

“Yes and no. Yes, the game is not one for quitters. I had to work hard at disappearing,” Kilgore continued, “Back then I had too damn much machismo to fake my death. Didn’t want anyone to think I lost one.”

“Not to mention you wanted to wag your finger in the face of the system that you exited.”

“There was that,” Kilgore admitted. “It was annoying early on. We moved every eight months, no matter what. I had those three milk bottles rattling around in the trunk when I first drove past this place. I bought the property and summered here every other year until I got up in age, then I figured it was okay to finally settle down.”

“You had to know you’d draw attention to yourself with this kooky farm.”

“It’s not like I’m competing with Disney. You have to want to come here. As I said, I don’t advertise.”

“Looks like you got too lazy. You knew all along that you don’t just waltz away.”

“Fraid I did,” Kilgore noted.

“Fraid it caught up with you.”

“I figured it might. I had a plan in place.”

“What brilliant strategy did you lay out for me?”

“The plan was meant to be used years ago. At my age, I’m not running anymore. There comes a time in life when you feel at peace with your Creator. I’m there. Are you?”

Chapter 13

“I’ve been here for less than an hour and you’ve all but told me that you killed my relatives and talked about it, and talked about getting killed yourself, like it was nothing more than smashing milk bottles.”

“Plus or minus milk bottles mean more to me.”

“I plan to make this a long and uncomfortable evening for you,” Bradley said. “Your arrogance makes me want to set you on fire.” He then bashed a glass case, pulled out the two pristine milk containers and slammed them to the ground. Kilgore watched the bottles shatter into hundreds of little pieces.

“Will you think me arrogant if I tell you where I keep the matches?” Kilgore remarked.

“Enough talk. Get up!” Bradley demanded.

Kilgore complied with no hesitation. A glimmer of delighted expectation flickered in his eyes. Broken glass crunched under his feet. Again he looked satisfied. Bradley took note of the oddity.

“Your arrogance knows no bounds. I assure you I’ll take all due pleasure in your torment and torture.”

“You made a mistake coming here. The bell has been rung and somebody has to die.”

“So it shall be,” Bradley said and moved in close.

Kilgore smiled broadly, but offered no response.

“I’ll break you of that smugness. Wait and see I *will* break you.”

“I have never been one to process, to talk about all the ill will I sprung on the world, or the regrets of things left undone, but you’ve presented me with the golden opportunity to share one interesting tidbit. You see, Huckleberry, the one great love of my life was not killing, but make no mistake, she’s a killer, indeed.”

Unexplainably, Bradley turned on his Italian leather heels and caught a glimpse of the lovely killer.

Mrs. Kilgore shot Bradley in the face at point blank range.

“Why didn’t you signal for me earlier?” she asked, painstakingly.

“I was having fun until he broke the bottles,” Kilgore said.

“I heard about Jed,” she said, embracing her husband. “I’m sorry.”

“I hope he lived a good life,” he said. “But it is what it is. Damn, I don’t think I can replace the bottles he smashed.”

“We should clean up in case the children return,” his wife suggested.

“I’ll put these fellows in the compost pile for tonight. In the morning, after I feed the herd, I’ll mix them in with the manure.”

“Dinner in or out?” she asked.

“You decide,” Kilgore said, as he picked up Bradley’s milk bottles. “At least no harm came to these beauties. Let me run them back to their spot and then we’ll deal with dinner.”