

The Rim

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Approximately 20,000 words

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Jim Sturgis stumbled out of the tree line onto Old Hiawassee Road, and his ankle buckled like he'd forgotten how to walk on flat ground. He shrieked and immediately clamped his hands over his mouth, and the birds in the limbs took the hint and followed suit. It was 7 a.m. on Saturday, August 11. He'd been missing for the better part of two weeks, but from the savage expression on his scratched and bloody face, it looked as if he'd been gone a century.

He stared at the tangle of trees – cypress, buttonwood, black mangrove –so plentiful throughout west central Florida, and so willing to provide a near-impenetrable screen, both around and overhead. The road itself extended straight ahead for a couple hundred yards in either direction before disappearing into the trees. Deryck had joked recently how it was impossible to see beyond a half-mile anywhere in Florida. Jim pushed Deryck's voice out of his head in a hurry.

His breath, coming out in a heaving rasp, stopped abruptly when he saw, nailed to a tree a few yards away, a warped wooden sign: "Old Hia 7." Jim bent over to catch his breath, and remembered the old Sony Hi-8 video camera strapped securely to his hand. He stood upright slowly, raking a bare arm across his forehead as the sweat pouring down in rivulets, matting his mop of black hair. His shredded t-shirt and jeans were soaked. He looked like he'd engaged in a fully clothed swim.

He started when he saw a police cruiser emerge from the trees, bug-like as it trundled towards him. It was still far enough away he couldn't hear the engine, so they probably hadn't seen him either. If they had they would have sped up, without a doubt.

Jim's eyes widened, like he'd had an unsettling epiphany. He wrenched the video camera from his hand and cocked his arm back, ready to sling it hard into the thick brush where he'd been a couple minutes ago. Then he stopped, and instead hit the eject button. He pulled out the small videotape and held it in his hand as he again hiked back his other arm. This time he catapulted the camera through the air. Jim didn't have a terribly athletic physique, but had plenty of lean muscle, and the camera went far before it landed in a clump of indistinguishable bushes. He'd been so excited when he'd found it in a box of old stuff in his trailer two weeks ago. Now he didn't give it another thought, and likely never would again.

He glanced back down at the videocassette, then dropped it onto the soft-packed dirt of the road. His foot came smashing down on it - four times, with a controlled viciousness. He picked up the mangled plastic pieces and magnetic tape and began

ripping them apart, sparing a quick glance at the approaching cruiser. The occupants still, apparently, hadn't seen him.

Jim tossed the ruined pieces into the brush, out of sight from the road. He began jogging away from where he had emerged less than two minutes ago. He needed to be found, after all - the cruiser wasn't the ride he'd been hoping for, but he didn't have time to be picky.

In his haste, he didn't spare a glance down at the site of the videotape's supposed demise, which was now pockmarked with heel marks and a couple stray plastic pieces of the tape's casing. If he had seen them, he would have cursed himself (in his father's voice, always his father's voice) for a fool who could never do a job right.

Oh well. Act in haste, repent in leisure, they say. Jim would have plenty of time to repent that act of carelessness over the next few hours. For a couple others, that leisure time would stretch out to a lifetime.

"Hello, 911 dispatch, what is the nature of your emergency?" Hildy's southern charm poured into the receiver like she loved everything about emergencies. Shirley rubbed her burning eyes as she tried to suppress a yawn, but smiled. Wait for it...

"Oh, hi, Clara. Yes, dear. No, burst pipes don't really count as an emergency... Okay, have you turned off your main water line? It's the spigot on the side of your house. Of course I'll wait on the line. Hurry, though..."

Shirley had come on as a deputy five years ago, newly transplanted from the Los Angeles Police Department. She'd told Hildy it wasn't customary to answer a 911 call with "hello." Hildy had fixed her with an cool, appraising look. "Everything stinks, Deputy Armand," she'd replied. "Doesn't mean we have to be a grouch about it." Hildy's undergirding standoffishness towards her had eased some since then, which put her miles ahead of most everyone else in town.

Shirley had been on a constant learning curve on the subject of Accepting What Can't Be Changed since her arrival in Sterling Springs, and definitely more so recently. "Hulking" Josh Settler had stepped down as Sheriff four months ago. "You're a force for stability," he'd told her on his last day in office, before taking his wife on a retirement trip to Alabama that would eventually become permanent. "You're not a stoplight. You don't tell people where to go or when to move." He'd towered over her 5'7" inches as he dropped a multi-volume set of The Complete Works of Shakespeare into a box with his

other personal effects. She'd wondered more than once if their shared love of English lit was what got her the deputy job. "You're a streetlight. You tell people they're safe, because *you're* not moving." Shirley had wondered if she could do that. And she hadn't been alone.

"He's still in the Tank, Sheriff." Shirley glanced away from Hildy's latest home repair instructional. Deputy Gib Collins's voice had a slightly chiding quality, going perfectly with his amiable face, tanned from a recent hunting trip. His eyebrows were raised in a just-in-case-you-forgot expression.

And he's checking to see if I have, in fact, forgotten the missing hiker who turned up inexplicably and is now in our only interrogation room, Shirley thought, taking a gulp of the coffee she'd doctored into a tan-colored murk, and wishing the caffeine would kick in faster. Gib probably thought she was unqualified, like some others, but he didn't *want* to think that, and she was grateful. Of course, thinking one's boss was unqualified usually preceded the thought *they* should be boss.

She lowered her mug, "Come Forget the World at Sterling Springs!" emblazoned on the side, and stifled a yawn. The wall clock read 9:17 - Jim had been a guest of the Tank for nearly half an hour, and according to Gib, wasn't happy about it. Shirley knew how he felt. She had been up all night at a stretch of road south of town known as the Howell Branch Overpass, having stepped in for one of her deputies to do security for a crew doing roadwork blasting. She'd spent the night drinking coffee out of a thermos and alternately wondering why anyone in Florida would do roadwork in August, even at 3 a.m., and why she had to be so flippin' accommodating. Her plan had been to finish the shift, check in at the station, then go home to her apartment and grab a few hours of sleep. She'd turned 43 a couple months ago... she no longer had the will nor the urge to pretend she had a 20 year-old's body.

But Gib had call her, minutes before the shift had ended... Jim Sturgiss had been found, with a head full of secrets. So it was time to slug back the coffee, ignore the fact she probably smelled less than lemony-fresh, and get to work.

Her eyes settled on a photo, taped to the front of her monitor, of herself, taken at an L.A. police function a year before she'd fled to Sterling Springs. She was wearing a low-slung black dressing gown, her long auburn hair (she wore it shorter now) was done up, and her caramel colored skin, a product of her third-generation Iranian heritage, had a healthy glow. Her face was frozen in a very charming mid-laugh. Below the photo, in

big black letters, read the caption, "SHIRLEY ARMAND: DOES SHE REALLY HAVE WHAT IT TAKES?"

"Damn skippy I do," she said under her breath. This was a daily mantra for her. She guarded the fact she needed a mantra with utmost care.

"Where did you find him?" She stood and walked to the far corner of the office. Most of the building was comprised of desks for her and her deputies, as well as Hildy's switchboard, in a big common area, separated from a small waiting area by double glass doors. One of the deputy's desks had been shoved aside to make room for empty wall space and a wheeled dry-erase board. Shirley described this to the press as their "Command Center," though the whole corner looked more like a papered mess - lots of post-it notes, maps and circles, hand-drawn arrows indicating search patterns and dates.

"Old Hiawasee Road. About three miles north of 285." Gib pointed to one of the maps.

"Oh, god. We weren't even close." Shirley massaged her forehead, already hearing voices in her head. Town father-type voices, looking for a reason to squawk. They had been looking for Jim Sturgiss and his three friends for five days. Shirley had led the charge, but never had a lot of hope. Hikers historically went missing in the area from time to time - there was a lot of forest, and a lot of swamp, all waiting for someone to be careless.

The town itself didn't have much hope either, and it was hard not to take it as yet another vote of no confidence in her office. She felt it everywhere - from dwindling numbers of volunteers to the clerk at the supermarket. LA had been a tough place, especially at the end, but Sterling Springs was a whole different animal. Contrary to the attempt at friendliness emblazoned on the welcome signs on Highways 12 and 17 (and its coffee mugs), Sterling Springs didn't particularly want anyone to Come Forget the World. If you were already there, good, your membership was secure. If not, it was best to move along. And she had, of course, opted to stay.

Gib looked at her with concern. "You sure your up for this, Sheriff? You had a long night, didn'tcha?"

"I'll be all right. I'm just waiting for Frank to email me a file." She took a deep breath and smiled. "After we get that we can get to it."

Gib looked at her skeptically. He'd found Jim barely two hours ago, bundled him into the back of the cruiser, then traced his tracks in the soft soil back to a couple pieces of wrecked tape. Gib had stepped off the road and found the rest almost immediately.

Gib insisted Jim, sitting zombie-like in the squad car, didn't see this, and so didn't know they had the tape fragments in their possession. Gib had taken him to Sterling Springs's only urgent care clinic, then brought him to the station. The whole time, Jim apparently said only two things, over and over, in response to Gib's inquiries - "I don't remember anything," and, "I want to go home."

Gib stared at the maps as well. "You think there's anything on the tape that could help us?"

"I hope so. We need it to. Maybe it'll jog his memory."

"Yeah. Funny he's the one we found, huh?"

Shirley watched him out of the corner of her eye, looking for any loaded meaning, although she wouldn't have blamed him. If Gib had picked up one of the other MIAs, they wouldn't be in the Tank... they'd be seated comfortably in the venerated Command Center, poring over maps with her. With Jim, she had to fight the urge to barge into the Tank and throw him against a wall, or just plead with him not to do anything stupid. She'd had a front row seat to Jim's oddness, his otherness, many times, and she was certain they were going to see it on full display today.

Her monitor pinged and Shirley walked back to her desk. In her inbox was a new email from Frank Dermont. When Shirley had gotten the call from Gib ninety minutes earlier, she had driven straight to the clinic and retrieved the tape fragments from Gib while Jim, unbeknownst, was getting his patch job. She had immediately taken them to Frank, a perpetually upbeat retired A/V professor from the University of Florida, now owner of one of several bait and tackle shops in town. Frank had taken a look at the magnetic tape and promised her good things, and quickly.

Attached to the email was a video file, labeled "Hi 8 first pass." Frank's email itself was brief: "Here ya go. This is before I start doing my thing. Hopefully can get more. Lots of degradation, big pieces missing, partic. at end. But think I can do more here. I'll keep u in loop."

Shirley typed in reply: "Thx Frank. Send me updated files when you can. I'm on a bit of a clock here." She signed it "Sheriff Armand." She didn't know if Frank would keep after this or drop it at the first sign of a tackle-related emergency... so he might need reminding about who he was dealing with.

She clicked on the file and sat back. Gib walked around her desk and propped himself against the windowsill, eyes on her screen. And, Shirley noticed, Hildy had

wrapped up Nora Slocum's domestic crisis more quickly than usual. She was leaning in as well.

A helpful title stamp over a blue screen to introduce the video: "Hi 8 recovered video 7.12.18. First pass. Reassembled by Frank Dermont."

The blue screen cuts to black. Then gray, as the footage begins rolling. Lots of white, wavy lines and static. A shaky, lumpy image appears onscreen, then stabilizes – a man, sitting on the ground, facing away from the camera. But the raspy voice speaking a moment later belongs to Jim Sturgis. At the sound, the man looks at the camera – Matt Townsend, present whereabouts unknown. His model good looks and strong jaw usually make him easier to recognize.

"Oh, Maaaatt! Check out what I found!"

The onscreen Lump/Matt barks a short laugh, which sounds a little frayed. "Is that what [garbled] it is?"

Jim, presumably holding the camera, answers back something garbled, then... "Atlantic Rim Young Filmmaker finals."

Matt, impressed... barely: "Where'd you even find a tape for that thing?"

"Ebay."

Matt presumably laughs again. The tape degradation makes it sound like a short wheeze.

After an uncomfortable four second silence, Jim again: "So, we got the band back together. Adventure [garbled] us?"

Matt hesitates. "Jim, why are we here?"

A couple beats of silence. "I thought it'd be fun. (garbled) you know? And to celebrate, kinda..."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know. And (garbled) man. I mean that. But, why *here*? We coulda [garbled], or ...

A new voice cuts in, sounding like it's the wrong speed, like Alvin the Chipmunk. Whoever it is, he's calling them from a good distance away: "Hey guys!"

Cut to blue screen, with this helpful title: "Significant degradation. Working on it!" More wavy lines and short flickers...

Murky darkness, lit by weird flashes... some kind of manmade light. A shadow, flickering in and out. Gray slashes of static waving across the screen, with an occasional green smudge of color.

And a garbled phrase, only a few words coherent: "Underground." Garbled.
"Don't" Garbled. "Jim!" And suddenly the sensation of loss of balance, with a weird flash
of light. Different this time, as if coming from somewhere further back.

And, behind the camera, sounds that could only be screaming.