

BLINDERS KEEPERS

John Rachel

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[Sample Chapter]

by

John Rachel

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*Collapse, chaos, confusion, rioting, looting.
And that's the good news!*

America is coming apart and the President can do nothing to stop it.

Nonetheless, 23-year-old Noah Tass has his own problems. Stuck his entire life in the hayseed capital of the Bible Belt after his father abandoned him over 18 years ago, he has no future, all his friends are losers, his job is a dead end, his fashion-challenged mom is stark raving mad, his clueless sister a meth head stripper.

It was time to bail!

Yes, it was time for a new plan, a whole new direction, time to discover America, to kick start his life. Noah leaves Missouri and for a year truly experiences the adventure of a lifetime.

Noah soon discovers the country has become one big loony bin, as he is thrust into the puppet theater of contemporary American life, and the cast includes a deranged blundering president, brutal agents of the ATF, FBI and NSA — thugs who shoot first and ask questions later — and an underground of unkempt, wild and wacky but endearing freaks who are trying to overthrow the existing order.

How does that timeless expression go?

*What doesn't kill you makes
you all the stronger.*

Hmm

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Chapter One

State of the Union

It was that time of year again. Last week of January.

The President was making his much anticipated State of the Union Address.

After the usual greetings and initial courtesies — thanking everyone for coming, acknowledging the important players in all branches of the government, and offering gracious regards for a few special invited guests, — the President delivered the type of crowd-pleasing line which has been the linchpin of State of the Union addresses for as long as anyone cared to remember.

“As I stand before this great body and look out at the faces of those who have dedicated themselves to this great nation, I can say with absolute confidence that America is on strong and certain footing.”

Then abruptly his expression changed, he shook his head and stopped speaking. Hands grasping the edges of the podium, he looked down at his feet and appeared to be lost in thought.

What followed was both unexpected and certainly unprecedented. He looked back up. Gone was the confident smile, the twinkle in his eye, the arched optimistic brow. He appeared somber, a touch sad, apologetic.

“Who am I trying to fool here? You, my respected Congressmen? Some of the finest legislators to ever hold public office? The excellent justices of the Supreme Court who preside over the greatest legal institution in history? Myself? No, I’m not here to try to fool anyone. These are times unlike any this nation has ever seen. So I’ll tell you exactly what the state of our union is. It’s a fucking mess!”

A deathly silence filled the entire congressional chamber. If a pin had dropped, it would have been possible to know its exact size and just how many times it bounced. What wasn’t entirely clear was if they had somehow missed what he just said, or if they had heard it, but it hadn’t actually registered. Blank faces and unfocused eyes filled the chamber.

Then, as if being directed by some invisible conductor, or moved by an invisible resonant force field, everyone immediately stood up and began with thunderous applause, cheering, and raucous acclamation, to give him a huge standing ovation. This went on and on, for several minutes at least, never in the least waning in intensity. The President smiled and waved, basking in the adulation. Finally, he had enough and made it clear he had more that he wanted to say. Using a palm’s down gesturing with his hands, he eventually got them to sit back down.

“So here’s what we’re gonna do. I want you all to look down at the floor. Now pull your pant legs up over your calves. What do you see? For those senators and congressman from Texas, this will be easy. You won’t have to imagine. The rest of you, just look and see what I’m seeing. See those loops. Those are bootstraps. Yes, bootstraps. Okay. Now look back up at me.”

Dramatically the President held up high in front of him his two index fingers.

“See these? What we’re gonna do is take these and insert them right in those bootstraps. Then all together, we’re gonna lift. We’re gonna lift like no one has ever lifted before. And we’re gonna pick ourselves up. We’re gonna pick ourselves up and we’re gonna stay up. Do you know why? I’ll tell you why. Because this is America. This is the greatest country that ever was or ever will be. And as we have demonstrated time and time again, as we have shown the naysayers and skeptics over and over, this is one country that can do it. We will do it! Yes! By God we will do it! Ladies and gentlemen, thanks to each and every one of you for your unselfish dedication, your unwavering patriotism, your honorable service to this great country. God bless America!”

Everyone in the chamber, congressman, jurists, ushers, guards, special guests, select members of the press, again leaped to their feet. The response this time was totally over the top. It made the first ovation look like they had been standing graveside at a wake.

Suddenly and without warning, over the explosive din of the hysterical whooping and yelling, could be heard blasting from P.A. speakers hidden behind the long drapes at the rear of the gallery, the U.S. Army band playing *Happy Days Are Here Again*. This theatrical touch just added to the ongoing chain reaction, notching the hysteria up another two levels.

With climactic flair which rivaled the best Superbowl half-time shows, red, white and blue balloons then dropped from the ceiling. Like crazed, frenetic school children, the congressman start batting them around.

Maybe the country was going to hell in a hand basket. But darn it all, there was no reason to get all down in the mouth about it.

Bambi Meets Godzilla

The sun wasn’t even up yet. Noah couldn’t sleep. This was going to be a big day for him. By the end of the week, his whole life would change.

He slipped out of bed, made coffee, glanced out of the second story window of his miserable flat on the outskirts of town. Grey meets grey on a dull landscape that offered little and promised more of the same.

He poured some dry cat food in the dish beside the sink, then with a steaming cup of America’s worst coffee in hand, sat down at his Acer desktop computer. As it

booted up, his favorite fluffy kitty, Capri, jumped onto his lap. What an irresistible ball of fur! He rubbed behind her ears and under her chin, his petting skills fine-tuned to her hedonistic pleasures over the past two years. In his eyes, she was still the helpless little kitten he found two winters ago, shivering under the steps of his mother's house, abandoned and close to starving.

"Oh, Capri. Now don't you go telling Naomi you're the real love of my life."

The desktop photo of a Himalayan Sherpa came up on his monitor.

Perhaps sensing her time was up, Capri jumped down and went into the kitchen to eat the Purina pressed cardboard pellets in her dish.

Noah sipped his coffee and started his routine.

He looked at his email. All spam. Deleted.

He checked the headlines on USA Today Online. All rumors and garbage.

He then pulled up a video of *Bambi Meets Godzilla* on YouTube.

He loved this little film. How many times had he seen it? Fifty? A hundred?

Almost the entire length of the three-minute movie consisted of opening credits rolling over an idyllic animation of Bambi eating and frolicking in the forest. Gentle spring flute music playfully accompanied the chirping of birds. Finally the credits finish and to a thunderous, forest-shaking *kaboom!*, Godzilla's giant foot comes down and squashes the innocent little fawn. All we see is Godzilla's grizzly leg and Bambi's four tiny twig-like limbs sticking out from under the giant reptilian foot. The music and birds have stopped. Now as the *kaboom!* trails off in a long tail of reverb, **The End** fades up on the screen and the film is over.

As many times as he had watched it, it never failed to put him in a great mood. Of course, the first twenty or thirty times left him rolling helplessly on the floor in convulsions of laughter. Now it just left him pleasantly amused.

Naomi had gotten up and wandered sleepily into the room. She put her hands on Noah's shoulders, kissed the top of his head, and managed to get her lips functioning.

"Are you watching that again?"

"It's inspiring."

"Ugh! That's horrible! Seeing that poor, helpless little creature crushed inspires you?"

"It confirms my belief that the world is as screwed up as I think it is."

Now it was Naomi's turn for a hot beverage. She was a tea person. She went into the kitchen and started the kettle.

Noah shut down the computer and got ready for work.

"I'll see you at dinner. But the guys are doing a going-away thing for me tonight."

"I'm sure it'll be a night of thought-provoking conversation and ennobling sentiments."

Naomi was such a treasure. She had to be the only person within 1000 miles with anything resembling intelligence, wit, perspective. How was it possible for such a sexy creature to have such a remarkable mind and a maturity at age twenty, that people in this redneck wasteland never achieved over their entire lives? He and Naomi had been living together now for five months. Every day was a surprise and a source of discovery and wonder with her. She obviously loved, understood, accepted him in ways he never could have imagined, much less hoped for.

Was it really possible he was walking away from all of this?

Heavy Metal

Noah dutifully ambled into Building C and punched the clock for his last day at work — technically his last *half*-day, as he'd be leaving for good at lunch time.

Merkel Industries got the tin from China. Then they cut it, rolled it, pressed it, shaped it, twisted it, configuring it to the specifications of their customers. Mostly they produced corrugated panels and food cans. Those were the two big product lines, purely because that's what their three main customers needed — Hormel for their Spam and ham lines, Bartlett for everything from pears and walnuts to pork and beans, and United Sheet Metal Products for shipping containers, mobile homes, trucking enclosures, storage sheds big and small, and roofing.

The company had been started in a barn by Thadeus Merkel right there in Noah's home town of Pulnick. Thadeus was a blacksmith by trade who had the imagination and vision to conceive of how he could extend his simple metalworking skills to create a range of products useful for both the home and places of business — kitchen and bathroom, garage and barn, factory and farm.

The firm was the longstanding pride of the state of Missouri, which had celebrated for nearly a century its innovation and expansion. At its peak throughout World War II, followed by the business and building boom of the fifties, Merkel Industries sprawled over the center of Monroe County and employed over 8000, nearly a third of the region's population. Of course, in the past fifty years a lot had changed in America's manufacturing sector. Now cheap labor across the globe had gutted its industrial capacity, resulting in significant and steady reduction nationwide in the durable trades workforce.

To remain competitive and profitable, Merkel had gradually downsized and become the relatively small but solid company it currently was. The labor union was long gone. The region certainly didn't substantially depend on it any longer for its bread and butter. But it had its place, its own secure and respected position in the community and among its sustainable set of loyal customers. It was still at the top of the list for most desirable places to get a job, both for the school dropouts and for those who made it all the way through Calvin Coolidge Jr.-Sr. High School, who perhaps had rudimentary job skills, but were not in a position to go to junior college or a vocational school to obtain specialized job training. It was the factory equivalent of pumping gas, working at McDonalds, or clerking at one of the convenience stores in the area.

In his daily rounds, Noah came in visual contact with practically all of the four hundred plus employees who worked at Merkel, mostly those in the manufacturing area, since he was constantly carting pallets of raw galvanized sheet metal to them, where it was processed into the requisite final configurations. But he also became familiar with a number of the office staff, since he was the one assigned to go to the engineering office and pick up the new orders, spec sheets and blue prints.

Even so, he really spent 95% of his time side by side with just four other guys, all close to his own age — the Full Metal Jack Its, as they affectionately called themselves.

This mismatched, motley team manned the tractors, drove the fork lift trucks, maneuvered the hydraulic stackers, wielded the hand pallet movers, and operated the overhead cranes, to move hundreds of tons of metal every week across the thousands of square feet of factory floor space. They were renowned for their efficiency and

effectiveness, but reviled for often being reckless and risky in the performance of their duties. Despite countless close calls, their track record was impeccable, unmarred by any embarrassing or potentially harmful accidents. Not that this offered any comfort to anyone else working there. Employees always scattered when one of the heavy-duty Cat Lift trucks or medium-size Raymond haulers came bearing down on them, usually carrying 40% more than the approved load capacity of the vehicle, engine whining as the huge stack of sheet metal or pallet of corrugated storage shed siding swayed like a circus clown's implausible stack of kitchen dishes.

Their antics had so entirely become the stuff of local legends that they had their own t-shirt. A young secretary in the front office with an artistic flair and a raging crush on one of the Jack Its, designed it and had a number of them printed up. The front displayed a lift truck with its forks high in the air and King Kong on top beating his chest like he had conquered the world. The rear of the shirt said *The FMJIs Forever!*

The four guys that Noah was teamed with had all been working at Merkel for some time, and among them had almost twenty years of seniority.

Tal "Blow Me" Caswell was the unofficial but undisputed leader of the pack. He was so nicknamed for the epithet which seemed to introduce or be somehow incorporated in his every utterance. Someone said that if Tal was orally serviced every time he used that particular phrase, by the end of a work shift, he'd be sucked so dry he would turn into a dusty, desiccated powder. *'Like blow me, dude. We gotta have five loads over to Bay 7 like ten minutes ago.'* *'Hey, blow me. You still owe me five bucks from yesterday.'* *'The Lakers? Right! Blow me. Their whory glory days have been over since Kobe got whacked for honey dipping that chick, you know, that Laker Girl.'*

Steve Toblinski was the strong silent type and a chain smoker. For a while the guys called him Mute, but since he never answered to it the nickname got dropped. A tall muscular facsimile of Heath Ledger, he could just sit in a restaurant or bar with a cigarette in his hand, never say a word, and within ten minutes have at least five girls competing for him. He never looked anyone directly in the eye, conducting the entirety of his human relationships in the periphery of his vision. He always appeared to be lost in thought, though no one was privy to the mysterious workings of his mind. He never laughed out loud. In his moments of wild abandon, his handsome face might brighten momentarily in a tempered grin.

Freddie "Fat Fuck" Stangler was short, fat and giddy. His nickname did not seem to bother him, in fact he seemed amused by it, maybe even pleased, since it generated a certain pride in the acceptance it connoted. "Fat Fuck" was usually replaced by "F" in mixed company or just out of laziness. Between pepperoni sticks, candy bars, and other handfuls of junk food, he told jokes — cumulatively thousands of jokes — never to anyone's recollection repeating a single one. He seemed to be a walking encyclopedia of gags, one-liners, quips, humorous quotes, and funny stories with groaner punch lines.

Samuel "Ghost" Leek was an albino. Every hair on his body was white and his skin was a purplish pink and highly sensitive to the sun. During the summer he could get a sunburn just running from his car into the factory, so he always wore a wide-brim hat when he was outside. Though his albinism implied a fragility or vulnerability, the fact was he was incredibly powerful and nearly indestructible. He often by himself

did the real heavy lifting, or would be on one end of some huge load while three guys were on the other. He was understandable shy, since he looked like the photographic negative of a human being, but once engaged was the most personable and easy to get to know of the bunch. To add to the gasp-inducing first impression he made, Ghost had a scorpion tattooed across his face.

Noah had been spared being subjected to a nickname. A few were tried along the way but nothing really stuck. Maybe it was because he was hard to define. No one could read him. He was a Teflon enigma. He always was right there in the thick of conversations but often left everyone scratching their heads. Noah enjoyed propagating a moderately mirthful confusion. Not especially difficult with this particular crowd.

The five of them were all around the same age, within five years of one another. Noah at 23 was the youngest, Steve the oldest at 28. They had all gone to the same high school — since there wasn't an alternative, what local boy hadn't? — but none had been in the same class.

They worked together well. They were a good team. They got the job done, whatever it was, quickly and efficiently. While they constantly vilified management, the usual stuff — not getting paid enough, their working conditions, the cowpiss-in-a-cup the vending machine swill passed off as coffee, the line bosses generally having their heads up inside a dark orifice — they obviously took pride in their work and relished what occasional praise came their way. It wasn't uncommon to see them around town wearing their navy blue work shirts with the Merkel Industries logo, even on their days off.

Noah was easily accepted when he first came to Merkel. There was no requirement that he jump through hoops to earn his place on the team. Everyone got along well, both on the job and when they started inviting Noah to party with them. "Partying" could be anything — riding around, hitting a few bars, dropping in at some lame Pulnick party, going bowling or to a rodeo or some other local town event — but by unstated consent it always included two essential elements: drinking and looking at chicks. While these weren't the apogee in the soaring arc of human aspiration, Noah had no aversion either, so even if he was nowhere as aggressive a drinker or ogler as his workmates, he still fit right in. He felt a camaraderie, a male bonding. It felt good to have some guys to hang out with.

There was only one area which could have been a source of serious animosity. But by virtue of a silent pact of diplomacy, it was never discussed.

Noah was a Michael Jackson fan. The Full Metal Jack Its worshipped at the altar of heavy metal rock music.

Not even pop metal like Bon Jovi, Def Leppard or Guns N' Roses. That was wussy boy stuff. They liked the dark, dirty and demented. The stuff that would rip your brain out of your skull and tear your mind up into a thousand little pieces. Even Motley Crue, despite their appetite for wild orgies, sprees of random destruction, harrowing drug abuse, and near death drinking, were looked on as pathetic posers. More pussy rock for pimple-faced wannabees.

Basically, the original four Full Metal Jack Its loved the stuff that the religious right hated. The stuff that would send them on an express train to Hell. And paralleling their vehement vilification of those who condemned them, their love of death metal burned with a religious fervor that made evangelical Christians and the

Islamic jihadist mujahidin look like lethargic hobbyists.

One time during a cigarette break out behind Bldg #5, in a rare moment when he actually put together a verbal stream of more than two consecutive words, the usually silent Steve philosophized about metal and its place in their world.

With an interesting ontological leap — a Unified Field Theory for work and play — he carried on for several minutes, as if during the hundreds of hours of muteness which preceded his soliloquy, he had been constructing his new theory and now it was ready to be made public. Some highlights ...

“Think about the men working in the mines, the ore being loaded into box cars, the smelting factories, huge ships carrying the refined metal to ports, then it being brought here. Thousands of men across the world. Strong men. Moving the metal. Working the metal. Constructing buildings and bridges. We're part of that huge army. Soldiers of steel.”

“Uh, Steve ... we're mainly doing tin here.”

“Steel. I meant it as a symbol, asshole. And if you can shut the fuck up, it'll make sense. Because it's all just energy. Nothing is solid. In the Universe, there is more space than substance. Just like music. They say in music the notes that are not played are more important than the notes that are played. You know. Like the silences. Like the silence of outer space.”

Noah had a little problem with that one. It seemed to him that heavy metal never let up. There was no silence. No space. Everyone played and screamed as much, as fast, and as loud as they could. It was like having a mountain dropped on you, with about as much “space” and wiggle room as you would have at the Earth's core. But he kept quiet.

“Music is vibration. Metal is the best conductor of vibration. Heavy metal music and real metal — I mean the stuff we handle every day — is like the perfect mating of everything in the world. It's the perfect mating of mass and energy. Like Einstein.”

Fat Fuck lit up like he was getting it.

“Ah! Are you saying Einstein was a headbanger?”

“No, you dumb fuck! Heavy metal music wasn't even around then. But maybe ... yeah. If he was around now, he probably would have been. $E = mc^2$ says it all.”

Noah might go along with that. The bands they really liked — Megadeath, Anthrax, Slayer, Venom, Motörhead, Sepultura — were about as subtle as a hydrogen bomb.

Tal, Steve, Fat Fuck, Ghost.

What could he say?

At least they weren't boring.

Suddenly out of nowhere, Tal came to a screeching halt within inches of Noah on the lift truck he was driving.

“Hey, sphincter lips. It's your last day. Let's do some damage.”

Good-Bye and Good Luck

“Good-bye and good luck, young man. Hope your little adventure works out.”

The HR rep, Frank Gladstone, looked to be in his early-fifties and had the air of someone who had been passed over many times before landing his current

powerhouse position as an acting assistant manager of human resources in a sheet metal factory in the middle of nowhere.

Despite his best efforts to fake the smile of paternal encouragement, Gladstone couldn't hide his skepticism. Noah was obviously another young punk who'd have to learn the hard way. The HR director handed Noah a folder of de-assignment documents which would soon find their permanent home in the trash. Pigeons make poop. Corporate flunkies make paperwork.

Noah exited the admin office building with a sense of being 3,000 tons lighter.

He was smiling ear-to-ear as he headed for the last time to the employees parking lot of Merkel Industries.

As he approached his old but dependable Chevy Caprice, he couldn't help but hear the scream and rumble of a Slayer song — it sounded like *Blood Red* in the swirling muck of the distortion — filtering through the dusty air of the parking lot. As he got closer, he realized it was coming from the lunch wagon of choice for the Full Metal Jack Its, Tal's '72 Oldsmobile Delta 88 — truly a classic — fully tricked out with mag wheels and rear fender skirts, a fake air scoop on the engine hood, a racing-style spoiler on the trunk lid, and a tattered ill-fitting black vinyl bra across the front. It sat so low Noah doubted it could clear a pair of gym sneakers. Whether this was intentional or just the result of broken springs was anyone's guess. He had never bothered to ask.

It was lunch time and as was their daily custom, Tal, Steve, Freddie, and Ghost were using the 30 minutes to best advantage. At least their version of best.

As Noah walked up, the passenger side window of the Olds rolled down. A cloud of smoke billowed out like the seats were on fire. The volume of the music came down just enough for Noah to be heard.

"What's for lunch? Sushi and matzo balls?"

"Nutrition bar."

Freddie held up a king-size Snickers.

Tal leaned over from the drivers side and offered Noah a hit off a humungous joint.

"Brain enema?"

Noah smiled and politely waved it off.

Tal took a monstrous hit, holding it in with clenched teeth. He passed the cigar-size spliff to Steve in the back seat. Then with eyes fired up like a coal furnace and an expression like he was looking at Lindsey Lohan's tits, he launched into a half-mocking home-boy drawl.

"Noah Tass! Blow me, motherfucker! This is so fucked up! You're really splitting? Dude! You're going to miss out on all the fun!"

"I know. I know. What am I thinking?"

Ghost squeezed his face into the open window. It certainly was quite a face. Puffy pinkish-purple skin adorned with tufts of cumulous cloud curly white hair and wispy white eyebrows. Then there was the tattoo. A scorpion the size of Nick Foles' hands.

"Tonight, motherfucker! Tonight we give you a Full Metal Jack Its send off you'll never remember."

Yeah. He'd miss these guys. Sort of. Maybe?

But would they miss him? Would they even remember him or would he dissolve

after a few more cloudbursts of weed-fueled hilarity?

“Tonight, gentlemen!”

And that was that. No more job. No more Merkel Industries.

As he drove away, for some reason his beat-up old Chevy felt like a Rolls Royce.

It took about 35 minutes for Noah to pull up in front of Alliant Bank in Monroe City, where he had his savings account.

After a few courtesies and formalities — a print-out of his account history to date, a withdrawal of funds request in triplicate — the mousy teller, who looked like she might have been raised by ground hogs, only without that much fashion sense, was counting out his money.

“Eight thousand seven hundred, eight hundred, ten, twenty, thirty, forty, five, six, seven, and twenty nine cents. That’s it. Are you sure you want to close out this account?”

“I’m opening a dental floss factory in Madagascar.”

“Well, golly. Good luck with that. I try to floss every day.”

“Awesome.”

Almost nine thousand dollars richer, he climbed in his car to head back home.

As he left the city limits of Monroe, Noah felt like he had slipped into a sepia coma. He knew it was boring here. But he had never really noticed how dreary and drab it was. Grays and browns blended into browns and grays. The sky looked like a billowing mass of floating mucous. Norman Rockwell would have punched out and quit painting.

The drive back home was uneventful. In fact, it was less than uneventful. It was *anti*-eventful. Noah was certain that if anything *tried* to happen in this hopeless buttcrack of the Midwest, it would be sucked up by a cosmic energy sponge, stuffed into the infinite black hole of nothingness, and rendered null and void.

For 6 miles he got stuck behind a tractor. Finally, the jaw-dropping epiphany that his was not the only vehicle on the road broadsided the farmer. He eased onto the shoulder and let the forty-five cars behind him pass.

Cruising southwest on Highway 24 pointed Noah directly back to Pulnick.

The skyline loomed ahead like the diminutive mirage of an afterthought.

He pulled into town. What there was left of a town.

There was one main street. Reflecting an astonishing burst of creativity decades ago, it was called Main Street.

As he drove through, it struck him how forgiving he had been up till now. Without the prospect of escape he had always just accepted it for what it was, or more accurately, what it had become.

Maybe at some point, it had halcyon days of glory and splendor. But now Pulnick was a shambles. It had become a victim of big box collateral damage when a Walmart had opened in adjacent Ralls County. Pulnick’s legacy stores, some that went back generations, were driven into the red and had no choice but to shutter their doors.

There had been a barber shop. The spinning candy-stripe pole sat idle. Now looking through the front windows, the place appeared to be storage space for a mattress company, which had no posted hours of business and never seemed to be open anyway.

The five-and-dime had become some sort of antique mall, which at least had the potential to offer an item-by-item flea market for the town’s history. Unfortunately,

the only real antiques were the five or six ladies who manned their booths full of worthless junk, hideous old clothes, and broken household appliances. Stuff that even the Salvation Army Store in nearby Fennersville wouldn't touch.

Three home-style restaurants had for years happily thrived. The most popular had been Fat City, a meat and fries place where in better days gastronomical gut bombs were consumed by the hundreds. Every spring it sponsored a pork-and-beef-barbecue street festival, which brought in people from five counties. They claimed the smoke from the barbecue pits drifted all the way to mainland China. The other two eateries were Gilda's Home-style Cooking and Mark Twain's Pudding & Pie, which despite the name had made the best fresh bread for counties around, seven days a week. Now all three were out of business.

A hardware store, a walk-in vet clinic, two beauty salons, a sewing supplies and yarn shop, a Bible book store, a collectibles consignment shop, and a genuine country-style haberdasher, were all likewise out of business. Several still had their last words of apologies and regret posted in their now empty and unattended storefront windows.

The only exception was Fuller's Apothecary. Mr. Fuller mysteriously seemed content running his business at a loss, or had some unknown source of income which kept the place afloat. Whichever it was, the old-fashion drugstore held its own and opened its doors at 312 North Main, 7 am till 6 pm every day except Sunday. Fuller had expanded beyond medicinal needs and did a fairly brisk business in candies and frozen treats, though hardly enough to compensate for the loss of his entire prescription business to the mega-drugstore contained inside Walmart.

Even with Fuller's still in business, what charm the town might at one time have claimed had steadily eroded, as all along Main Street the paint peeled, the signs faded, the limestone discolored and dissolved, and the building bricks became dark and dingy with dirt and decay. The store front windows were either boarded up, unwashed and dusty, or randomly pitted as targets for occasional drive-by slingshot practice.

Pathetic.

Noah didn't even get out of his car. It was a drive-thru farewell.

He had one last stop before going home.

This he was truly not looking forward to.

He needed to say good-bye to his mom. Which required him trying to get her to comprehend that he was leaving. Much easier said than done.

When Noah pulled up to the house, his mom was on the front porch dressed as she always was. Trailer park chic. It was what Lady Gaga would look like at 60 if she fell on hard times and had garden variety dementia.

Today his mom was wearing a dark green track suit which had been accessorized with shiny sequins, jewels, and strips of fake rabbit fur. It was inexplicably cut out in back and showed the top of her leathery ass crack. She had a black vinyl New York Mets baseball cap sideways on her head, and additionally wore a thin woven leather headband which she might have gotten from a *Last of the Mohicans* memorabilia catalog. Instead of running shoes, she shuffled around tentatively on black plastic platforms, embossed with white Chinese characters.

She had a hose in her hand and was watering the lawn — in winter. Actually, she was watering a gravel parking area next to the porch where nothing ever grew even in summer.

"Hi, mom."

"Global warming. It's killing everything. I give up."

She put the hose away and they went into the house.

For the next hour, they talked. They talked the way they always talked. Noah would say something. His mother would reply like she was channeling King George III.

"Mom, I'm leaving."

"I have a new doctor. He's Mexican. Dr. Rajesh Gupta."

"Mom. That's an Indian name. From India. Like Gandhi."

"Same difference. I can't understand a word he says. When he talks he sounds like his mouth is full of guacamole."

"This shepherd's pie is good."

"That's pumpkin bread. I didn't have any flour, so I used ground beef."

"Mom, I'm leaving Pulnick for a while. I need to—"

"Why do you hate your sister? She's a nice girl."

"Mom, I don't hate Gretchen. I just don't know her anymore."

"You don't know your own sister? I thought I introduced you."

So it went.

Failing to accomplish his mission, he gave up and decided to leave.

His mom followed him out the door onto the porch.

"Can't you stay for a little longer? You can say hi to your father when he gets home."

"Mom. Dad left in '96. He hasn't lived here for eighteen years."

"Has it been that long?"

Noah gave her a long deep hug.

He had to fight the urge to cry.

Maybe she was crazy.

But she was his mom.

Motorcycles

What was it about motorcycles?

Maybe the psychologists were right. Perhaps in the greater scheme, the motorcycle was a perfect throbbing, lunging, testosterone-fueled, mechanized penile substitute. Strapping more than 1200 CCs and 150 horsepower of roaring metal between your legs, a charged vibrating bullet-like projectile capable of over 160 MPH in a quarter mile and able to leap school buses full of hot lusty high school cheerleaders, does have the suggestive strands, the titillating tinges of erotic thrills and carnal adventure.

Psychologists could think whatever they wanted.

Noah just thought they were cool.

He hadn't ridden since his accident nine months ago, the one that laid him up for almost two months. He didn't even have a bike, unless the twisted pile of scrap metal his Kawasaki Ninja 250R now was, somehow factored in.

But he thought about them often. In fact, all of the time. He was sure that when the time was right, he'd start riding again. In the meantime, he decided to live vicariously.

He had only gone to a few motorcycle events since he had started riding five or so years ago. A couple of local weekend barbecue and beer bashes had been put together by Hilltop Cycles, the shop in Hannibal where he did all his business. They were pretty feeble, with more little kids and grandparents chomping down hot dogs and hamburgers than serious riders making the scene.

But he liked the guys at Hilltop. He bought both of his bikes there, as well as all of the accessories that go with the territory — helmets, gloves, leathers, boots. They kept his machines tuned and lubed, or on the rare occasion he had some serious mechanical difficulties, did the troubleshooting and the heavy lifting to get him back on the road.

That was all history. His riding days were on hold. At least for now.

But here was the plan.

There were some shows and a number of motorcycle rallies he could attend in various parts of the country. It would give him an excuse for visiting these particular areas. He could scope out some of the road bikes and travel gear that was available for serious road tripping. By the time the weather started to warm up, he would be able to make an educated decision as to what he should buy. There was no hurry. For now, he would just cruise around, enjoy life, visit different cities and states, check out the scenery. He'd enjoy life as it happened. What could be better?

He found several he thought looked interesting. The first was coming up soon in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Not easy or cost-effective to fly there, but he could take a bus.

He was really excited. This was the missing piece of the puzzle.

Noah was still on the computer when Naomi got home from work. Not looking at *Bambi Meets Godzilla* this time. Rather, he was downloading some fliers and maps from the internet.

She glanced over at him but didn't say anything.

There on the floor next to the door was his backpack, ready to go.

Noah didn't have to guess. He knew what she was feeling.

But there was nothing to say. Nothing more anyway.

They'd been over and over this. She understood. But that didn't make it any easier. Not for either of them.

Noah really loved her. But not nearly as much as she loved him. And certainly not in the final, possessive way that drives a person to abandon their dreams.

He had been obsessed with getting out of this godforsaken wasteland of a town for too long to let himself get bogged down with a girl, no matter how much she cared for him, no matter how good the sex, no matter how perfect they were for one another.

If they truly were perfect, they could pick up where they left off once he figured out his life — once he got something resembling a life!

"So you're leaving."

"You know I have to."

"What are you looking for?"

"I don't know. I really don't know. It's nowhere in Missouri, that's for sure."

"That's for sure."

Usually he loved her keen sense of irony.

This time it slashed him like a razor, laying bare sharp pangs of guilt.

Noah stood up and gently gathered her into his arms.

"Come on, Naomi. I don't mean you. I've given this shithole 23 years of my life. It's given me nothing in return."

She broke free from his embrace and turned around. Was she crying? If she was, she was doing a good job of covering it up.

"I still don't understand what you're looking for, Noah."

"I'll know it when I see it. It's not here. It's the opposite of here. I'm dying in this town. I need to find some way to give meaning to my life."

She picked up one of the fliers he had just printed out.

"You're looking for the meaning of life at a motorcycle rally?"

"It's not entirely random."

"Sometimes random is good. In fact, in this case random might be preferable."

"It's not a mindless orgy."

"No. It's a mindless motorcycle rally."

"I like motorcycles."

"And I like whipped cream. But I'm not going halfway across the country to look at creampuffs and sundae toppings."

She went into the kitchen, then came back out with two glasses of cranberry juice.

"When?"

"Day after tomorrow. I'm taking the Greyhound to Indianapolis."

"You need a ride to the station?"

"You're too good to me."

"You're right. I am."

Man Up!

Noah was sure that his buddies meant well, he appreciated the gesture. But from what he could tell, tonight would just be another excuse to get shitfaced and raise hell — the Full Metal Jack Its singular idea of a good time.

It took them two-and-a-half hours to drive to the *Man Up!* It was right across the state line in East St. Louis, Illinois. A giant sign with the neon outline of a two-story high naked girl standing astride it, announced their wares: *All Nude - The Hottest Sexiest Girls In The World!!*

The bouncer at the door was as wide as the door. He checked them for weapons and eyed them warily, but he probably eyed everyone warily. They each paid the \$10 cover and stepped inside.

The entire club glistened with mirrors and chrome, had brilliant rock-concert lighting all around, a pumping pulsing sound system better than any he had ever heard, and two high-tech bars presided over by scantily-dressed, breathtakingly beautiful female bartenders, whose smiles alone could send a man reeling in lubricated vortices of sexual fantasy.

As they swept past the bar, Tal ordered a round on the fly, and dragged Noah right to the 'firing line', as it was called. This was the area right at the perimeter of the dance stage itself. There were seats one next to the other, and a narrow counter which wrapped around the entire stage, there for the guys to set their drinks on. This also provided a convenient surface to put their elbows for leaning in to get a better look. The girls would sometimes park one foot or stand on this surface so that they could get right in a guy's face with that sweet part of their bodies that held the most

fascination.

The drink of the evening was Buttery Nipples. Damn good drink when you're looking at a girl's shaved crotch. Round after round came and went in a sticky blur of sweet melon liqueur, butterscotch schnapps, and Bailey's® Irish Cream. It was a concoction that destroyed the liver, abused the pancreas, and disabled the brain.

Noah usually drank in moderation. If at the end of the evening he couldn't precisely nail the official benchmark for Designated Driver, he was always the most *designatable* driver.

But tonight even drinking in moderation only went so far. He sat there for almost three hours, moving little more than his eyeballs, bringing his dominant hand up just enough to dribble between his lips his overpriced drink. Not exactly burning a lot of calories. The alcohol level in his blood was definitely building up.

The girls came and went. The money just went.

The club had three stages. There were maybe twenty strippers on duty. They rotated on a pre-programmed schedule. The Full Metal Jack Its had been sitting at the main stage, but off in the corners of the club were two others, a little smaller but set up the same, with the firing line counter around three sides. They had fewer chairs and provided a slightly more intimate dance experience. Like the main stage, by now all of the seats were filled.

The girls danced three-song sets. At the beginning of each set, a live DJ — he must be somewhere in the club though Noah never spotted him — would announce the dancers.

*On stage three, to make your mouth water we have
Ariel. On stage two you can fly to Heaven with Angel.
And on the main stage, making her international
debut in the performing arts, we have now from
heartland of America itself, from the flatlands of
Monroe County, Missouri, where women are women
and sheep are sheep and the men can't tell them apart,
the lovely and enchanting Lady Tata.*

Noah's head felt very heavy and hung down on his chest as she mounted the stage. Lady Tata was well into her first song before he looked up ...

... and saw who it was.

Oh wonderful! Just wonderful!

Tal was sitting next to him and leaned over.

"Just look at this scaggy bitch. What a sorry-ass pair of tits!"

"That's Gretchen. She's a meth head."

"You know her?"

"That's my sister."

What followed was perhaps the longest nine minutes of Noah's life. Whether she was so high she didn't know it was him or just blocked him out, she showed no reaction. But Noah was still more uncomfortable than he could have ever imagined possible. Was there anything weirder than having his kid sister parading her shaved vagina at eye level back and forth in front of him? Especially in a club full of drooling bone monkeys? Long before she had removed every article of what little clothing she had started with, he just couldn't look at her.

He put some dollar bills on the counter and stared at his feet.

Mercifully, the third song ended, she collected the contributions from the generous benefactors of her wonderful new career, and picked up the tiny scraps of her costume scattered all around her. Then Gretchen quickly turned to leave.

Not that he thought she would care, Noah figured maybe he should mention to his sister he was leaving, and say good-bye.

After she climbed off the stage, he followed her toward the backstage dressing area. She was still ignoring him, but that was hardly unusual or unprecedented in their twenty-year relationship.

Gretchen reached the velour curtain draped over the doorway to the dressing room. A bouncer stood next to the door. He eyed Noah suspiciously as he saw him approach.

“Gretchen.”

She kept going.

“Hey, Gretchen.”

The bouncer moved between Noah and his sister as she went through the door.

“Listen. That last dancer. Could I talk to her?”

“If she wants to talk to you, she’ll come out.”

“No. Really! I need to talk to—”

“Right. You guys all need to talk to her. If I asked every motherfucker in this joint, they’d all say they need to talk to her. Back off.”

The bouncer pushed his chest out and positioned himself directly in front of Noah. He was huge and his bulk pretty much filled the entire doorway to the dressing room for the girls. But there was a slight gap between the curtain and the door jamb, so Noah stood on his tiptoes and leaned to one side to get a look.

“Gretchen! Gretchen! It’s—”

There seemed to be no transition. One second Noah was standing there. The next he was flat on his face on the floor in an arm lock. The pain was excruciating.

Then he was on his feet. Not through any effort of his own. The bouncer lifted Noah like he was a small sack of groceries and was now carrying him toward the exit. Three more burly bouncers appeared out of nowhere and were right behind them.

Tal, Steve and Ghost saw what was happening and jumped up. Freddie was just coming back from the lavatory and joined them. Tal tried to apply some diplomatic charm.

“Hi guys! What’s going on? This is my friend. Hey! Come on. He’s harmless.”

One of the Ten Commandments of bar bouncers declared that troublemakers traveled in packs. Tal, F, Steve and Ghost had just established the precise membership of the pack that Noah belonged to. Two more bouncers appeared. Were these guys dropping out of the ceiling? No one had noticed that a small army of buffalo-shaped guys in black pants and white shirts were there in the club when they walked in. The boys were a bit distracted at the time by a lot of skin.

The Full Metal Jack Its were all now being escorted to the parking lot.

*Keep those eyes in their sockets, gentlemen. On stage
three, we’ve got a sexy young thing who’ll put a bulge
in your trousers and make your girlfriend or wife look*

*like a mangy old dog, if she doesn't already. Oh my,
it's the delicious and talented ...*

Wow!

What a going-away party!

It was the kind that definitely made a guy want to ...

Go away.

[End of sample chapter]

More Books by John Rachel

If you were dazzled by what you just read, please check out these other fine novels by this author and political blogger.

“The Man Who Loved Too Much”

Trilogy



Billy Green is bright, enigmatic, and lost. He spent his first 28 years trying to figure out who he is and where he fits in. His life has been a wild, unpredictable quest to attach himself to some reality he can grasp and live with. He grew up in an abysmal suburb of Detroit, escaped to university life at Cornell, got married and divorced before being thrown headlong and entirely unprepared into the insanity and social chaos of New York City.

Book 1: Archipelago

Amazon (Kindle): amzn.to/1tyIRiw

Amazon (Print): amzn.to/1z8F8aD

Barnes & Noble: bit.ly/ZDnQVO

Apple iBook: bit.ly/1ycltFD

Smashwords: bit.ly/1w62HOX

Book 2: Entendre

Amazon (Kindle): amzn.to/18x1ZnS

Amazon (Print): amzn.to/1xfmjp3

Barnes & Noble: bit.ly/18OGY85

Apple iBook: apple.co/1bkFQe7

Smashwords: bit.ly/1AMUCPz

Book 3: Oxymoron

Amazon (Kindle): amzn.to/1LJnMc

Amazon (Print): amzn.to/1NZPU9Y

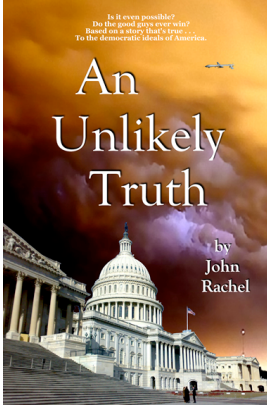
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“An Unlikely Truth”



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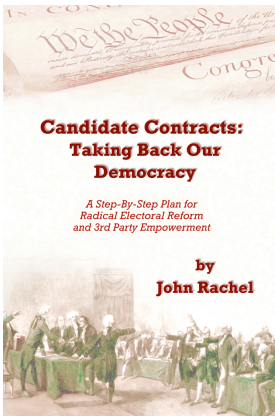
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This is a manual for constructive voting in the 2016 election. It presents a concrete plan for wresting control of the country and our democracy back from the rich and powerful, and restoring the constitutional mandate of government of the people, by the people, and for the people. It's not just more whining. It's a real plan!

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Amazon (Print): amzn.to/1L9SdIC

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Coming Soon

[2016 and beyond]

“Sex, Lies and Coffee Beans”

“Love Connection”

“The Last Giraffe”

“13 - 13 - 13”

“Happy Happy Dreaming Girl”

“The Naked American”

“St. Jerome’s Home For The Sexually Insane”

About the Author

John Rachel has a B.A. in Philosophy, has traveled extensively, been a songwriter and music producer, and is a bipolar humanist. He has spent his life trying to resolve the intrinsic clash between the metaphysical purity of Buddhism and the overwhelming appeal of narcissism.

Since 2008, when he first embarked on his career as a novelist, he has had eight fiction and two non-fiction books published. These range from three satires and a coming-of-age trilogy, to a political drama and most recently a crime thriller. The two non-fiction works were also political, his attempt to address the crisis of democracy and pandemic corruption in the governing institutions of America.

Never knowing when enough is enough, the hyperthyroid Rachel continues to be very busy. He has three more novels in the pipeline for publication in 2016: *Sex, Lies and Coffee Beans*, a spoof on the self-help crazes of the 80s and 90s; *Love Connection*, a drug-trafficking thriller set in Japan; and finally *The Last Giraffe*, an anthropological drama involving both the worship and devouring of giraffes, which unfolds in 19th Century sub-Saharan Africa. Several major publishers have declared that they will do everything in their power to make sure these books never see the light of day.

Moreover, he recently increased his output of incendiary political blogs, sure to alienate the remaining few remnants of his meager literary following.

John Rachel's last permanent residence in America was Portland, Oregon where he had a state-of-the-art ProTools recording studio, music production house, a radio promotion and music publishing company. He still writes music and, much to the annoyance of his neighbors in the traditional rural Japanese town where he now lives, attempts to sing his original songs.

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*You can follow John Rachel's adventures
and developing world view at:*
jdrachel.com

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*Since the open mind recognizes no borders, you are also
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Author John Rachel



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Two excerpts of *Blinders Keepers* have appeared as short stories in online and print publications. "The Little Engine That Could" appeared in the August 2012 issue of the Canadian magazine Ascent Aspirations, and "Crazy Is The New Desperate" appeared in the American magazine The Vein in September 2012.

The author also quoted song lyrics in the story: "Me and Bobby McGee" © 1969 by Combine Music Corporation, performed by Roger Miller and Janis Joplin, words and music by Kris Kristopherson and Fred Foster; "The Little Engine That Could" © 1997 by EMI Music, performed by John Denver, words and music by Warren Foster and Billy May; "That's Life" © 1962 performed by Gabriel & the Angels.