

DREAMCATCHER

By Stephen King

Excerpt Two: A TIME .com Exclusive

About ten feet from the granite slab that served as Hole in the Wall's front stoop, the man in the brown coat and orange hat fell down again. His hat tumbled off, revealing a sweaty clump of thinning brown hair. He stayed on one knee for a moment, head lowered. Jonesy could hear his harsh, fast breathing.

The man picked up his cap, and just as he set it back on his head, Jonesy hailed him.

The man staggered to his feet and turned tipsily. Jonesy's first impression was that the man's face was very long — that he was almost what people meant when they called someone "horsefaced." Then, as Jonesy got closer, hitching a little but not really limping (and that was good, because the ground underfoot was getting slippery fast), he realized the guy's face wasn't particularly long at all — he was just very scared and very *very* pale. The red patch on his cheek where he had been scratching stood out brightly. The relief that came over him when he saw Jonesy hurrying toward him was large and immediate. Jonesy almost laughed at himself, standing up there on the platform in the tree and worrying about the guy reading his eyes. This man wasn't into reading faces, and he clearly had no interest in where Jonesy had come from or what he might have been doing. This man looked like he wanted to throw his arms around Jonesy's neck and cover him with big gooey kisses.

"Thank God!" the man cried. He held out one hand toward Jonesy and shuffled toward him through the thin icing of new snow. "Oh gee, thank God, I'm lost, I've been lost in the woods since yesterday, I thought I was going to die out here. I . . . I . . ."

His feet slipped and Jonesy grabbed his upper arms. He was a big man, taller than Jonesy, who stood six-two, and broader, as well. Nevertheless, Jonesy's first impression was of insubstantialness, as if the man's fear had somehow scooped him out and left him light as a milkweed pod.

"Easy, fella," Jonesy said. "Easy, you're all right now, you're okay. Let's just get you inside and get you warm, how would that be?"

As if the word *warm* had been his cue, the man's teeth began to chatter. "S-S-Sure." He tried to smile, without much success. Jonesy was

again struck by his extreme pallor. It was cold out here this morning, upper twenties at best, but the guy's cheeks were all ashes and lead. The only color in his face, other than the red patch, was the brown crescents under his eyes.

Jonesy got an arm around the man's shoulders, suddenly swept by an absurd and sappy tenderness for this stranger, an emotion so strong it was like his first junior-high-school crush — Mary Jo Martineau in a sleeveless white blouse and straight knee-length denim skirt. He was now absolutely sure the man hadn't been drinking — it was fear (and maybe exhaustion) rather than booze that had made him unsteady on his feet. Yet there *was* a smell on his breath — something like bananas. It reminded Jonesy of the ether he'd sprayed into the carburetor of his first car, a Vietnam-era Ford, to get it to crank over on cold mornings.

"Get you inside, right?"

"Yeah. C-Cold. Thank God you came along. Is this — "

"My place? No, a friend's." Jonesy opened the varnished oak door and helped the man over the threshold. The stranger gasped at the feel of the warm air, and a flush began to rise in his cheeks. Jonesy was relieved to see there was some blood in him, after all.

Hole in the Wall was pretty grand by deep-woods standards. You came in on the single big downstairs room — kitchen, dining room, and living room, all in one — but there were two bedrooms behind it and another upstairs, under the single eave. The big room was filled with the scent of pine and its mellow, varnished glow. There was a Navajo rug on the floor and a Micmac hanging on one wall which depicted brave little stick-hunters surrounding an enormous bear. A plain oak table, long enough to accommodate eight places, defined the dining area. There was a woodstove in the kitchen and a fireplace in the living area; when both were going, the place made you feel stupid with the heat even if it was twenty below outside. The west wall was all window, giving a view of the long, steep slope which fell off to the west. There had been a fire there in the seventies, and the dead trees stood black and twisted in the thickening snow. Jonesy, Pete, Henry, and the Beav called this slope The Gulch, because that's what the Beav's Dad and *his* friends had called it.

"Oh God, thank God, and thank you, too," the man in the orange hat said to Jonesy, and when Jonesy grinned — that was a lot of thank-you's — the man laughed shrilly as if to say yes, he knew it, it was a funny thing to say but he couldn't help it. He began to take deep breaths, for a few moments

looking like one of those exercise gurus you saw on high-number cable. On every exhale, he talked.

"God, I really thought I was done-for last night . . . it was so cold . . . and the damp air, I remember that . . . remember thinking Oh boy, oh dear, what if there's snow coming after all . . . I got coughing and couldn't stop . . . something came and I thought I have to stop coughing, if that's a bear or something I'll . . . you know . . . provoke it or something . . . only I couldn't and after awhile it just . . . you know, went away on its own — "

"You saw a bear in the night?" Jonesy was both fascinated and appalled. He had heard there were bears up here — Old Man Gosselin and his pickle-barrel buddies at the store loved to tell bear stories, particularly to the out-of-staters — but the idea that this man, lost and on his own, had been menaced by one in the night, was keenly horrible. It was like hearing a sailor talk about a sea monster.

"I don't know that it was," the man said, and suddenly shot Jonesy a sideward look of cunning that Jonesy didn't like and couldn't read. "I can't say for sure, by then there was no more lightning."

"Lightning, too? Man!" If not for the guy's obviously genuine distress, Jonesy would have wondered if he wasn't getting his leg pulled. In truth, he wondered it a little, anyway.

"Dry lightning, I guess," the man said. Jonesy could almost see him shrugging it off. He scratched at the red place on his cheek, which might have been a touch of frostbite. "See it in winter, it means there's a storm on the way."

"And you saw this? Last night?"

"I guess so." The man gave him another quick, sideways glance, but this time Jonesy saw no slyness in it, and guessed he had seen none before. He saw only exhaustion. "It's all mixed up in my mind . . . my stomach's been hurting ever since I got lost . . . it always hurts when I'm ascairt, ever since I was a little kid . . ."

And he was *like* a little kid, Jonesy thought, looking everywhere at once with perfect unselfconsciousness. Jonesy led the guy toward the couch in front of the fireplace and the guy let himself be led. *Ascairt. He even said ascairt instead of afraid, like a kid. A little kid.*

"Give me your coat," Jonesy said, and as the guy first unbuttoned the buttons and then reached for the zipper under them, Jonesy thought again of how he had thought he was looking at a deer, at a *buck* for Chrissake — he had mistaken one of those buttons for an eye and had damned near put a bullet through it.

The guy got the zipper halfway down and then it stuck, one side of the little gold mouth choking on the cloth. He looked at it — gawked at it, really — as if he had never seen such a thing before. And when Jonesy reached for the zipper, the man dropped his hands to his sides and simply let Jonesy reach, as a first-grader would stand and let the teacher put matters right when he got his galoshes on the wrong feet or his jacket on inside out.

Jonesy got the little gold mouth started again and pulled it the rest of the way down. Outside the window-wall, The Gulch was disappearing, although you could still see the black scrawled shapes of the trees. Almost twenty-five years they had come up here together for the hunting, almost twenty-five years without a single miss, and in none of that time had there been snow heavier than the occasional squall. It looked like all that was about to change, although how could you tell? These days the guys on radio and TV made four inches of fresh powder sound like the next Ice Age.

For a moment the guy only stood there with his jacket hanging open and snow melting around his boots on the polished wooden floor, looking up at the rafters with his mouth open, and yes, he was like a great big six-year-old — or like Duddits. You almost expected to see mittens dangling from the cuffs of his jacket on clips. He shrugged out of his coat in that perfectly recognizable child's way, simply slumping his shoulders once it was unzipped and letting it fall. If Jonesy hadn't been there to catch it, it would have gone on the floor and gotten right to work sopping up the puddles of melting snow.

"What's that?" he asked.

For a moment Jonesy had no idea what the guy was talking about, and then he traced the stranger's gaze to the bit of weaving which hung from the center rafter. It was colorful — red and green, with shoots of canary yellow, as well — and it looked like a spiderweb.

"It's a dreamcatcher," Jonesy said. "An Indian charm. Supposed to keep the nightmares away, I guess."

"Is it yours?"

Jonesy didn't know if he meant the whole place (perhaps the guy hadn't been listening before) or just the dreamcatcher, but in either case the answer was the same. "No, my friend's. We come up hunting every year."

"How many of you?" The man was shivering, holding his arms crisscrossed over his chest and cupping his elbows in his palms as he watched Jonesy hang his coat on the tree by the door.

"Four. Beaver — this is his camp — is out hunting now. I don't know if the snow'll bring him back in or not. Probably it will. Pete and Henry went to the store."

"Gosselin's? That one?"

"Uh-huh. Come on over here and sit down on the couch."

Jonesy led him to the couch, a ridiculously long sectional. Such things had gone out of style decades ago, but it didn't smell too bad and nothing had infested it. Style and taste didn't matter much at Hole in the Wall.

"Stay put now," he said, and left the man sitting there, shivering and shaking with his hands clasped between his knees. His jeans had the sausagey look they get when there are longjohns underneath, and still he shook and shivered. But the heat had brought on an absolute flood of color; instead of looking like a corpse, the stranger now looked like a diphtheria victim.

Pete and Henry were doubling in the bigger of the two downstairs bedrooms. Jonesy ducked in, opened the cedar chest to the left of the door, and pulled out one of the two down comforters folded up inside. As he recrossed the living room to where the man sat shivering on the couch, Jonesy realized he hadn't asked the most elementary question of all, the one even six-year-olds who couldn't get their own zippers down asked.

As he spread the comforter over the stranger on the outsized camp couch, he said: "What's your name?" And realized he almost knew. McCoy? McCann?

The man Jonesy had almost shot looked up at him, at once pulling the comforter up around his neck. The brown patches under his eyes were filling in purple.

"McCarthy," he said. "Richard McCarthy." His hand, surprisingly plump and white without its glove, crept out from beneath the coverlet like a shy animal. "You are?"

"Gary Jones," he said, and took the hand with the one which had almost pulled the trigger. "Folks mostly call me Jonesy."

"Thanks, Jonesy." McCarthy looked at him earnestly. "I think you saved my life."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Jonesy said. He looked at that red patch again. Frostbite, just a small patch. Frostbite, had to be.

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Be sure to come back to TIME.com on March 19 for the third and final excerpt of Dreamcatcher.