

THE POTATO CREEK
CHAIR OF DEATH

by
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INT. A GARAGE - DAY

The empty front seat of a rust-speckled green Pacer. After a moment, MICHAEL, an edgy seventeen-year-old with shoulder-length hair, throws a bag into the back seat, gets into the car and sits in the driver's seat. For a moment he stares at his hands resting on the steering wheel. He reaches into his jacket pocket and takes out a set of keys. His hands shake as he selects a key and puts it into the ignition. He gets a hold of himself and starts the car. He presses the button on a garage door opener and the garage door opens. Light fills the garage.

EXT. SUBURBAN CLEVELAND - SAME

The Pacer backs out of the garage, down the driveway, and onto the street of a lower-middle-class neighborhood.

Before he puts the car into drive, Michael looks back at the house.

The house is weather-beaten and looks rather neglected. The curtains are drawn; the house seems very dark and still.

Next to the front step is a garden ornament—a bird with propellers for wings. A breeze picks up and the propellers start to spin.

Michael jumps at the sound of a voice through his half-opened window.

NEIGHBOR (O.S.)

Hey! HEY!

A NEIGHBOR across the street stands by his front door, holding a lunchbox up in the air. He is speaking to his daughter, a small KINDERGARTNER in a bright yellow raincoat, who stands at the end of the neighbor's driveway.

NEIGHBOR (CONT'D)

Your lunch.

Michael relaxes a little and watches.

Hunching over under the drizzle, the neighbor trots up to the kindergartner, places the lunch box in her hand, and kisses her on the forehead. The kindergartner walks down the driveway and turns onto the sidewalk. The neighbor turns toward the house, then stops, catching sight of Michael.

Michael draws back slightly, watching the neighbor.

The neighbor raises his hand, hesitates, then waves at Michael.

Michael rolls up his window. He puts the car in gear and starts to drive away.

The Pacer approaches an intersection.

The kindergartner stands on the street corner, watching the Pacer approach. The kindergartner stares at Michael as he drives by.

Michael is transfixed by the kindergartner's stare. He accelerates the car as he finishes the turn.

The kindergartner turns to watch as the Pacer speeds off down the street.

EXT. THE ROAD - DAY

A speed metal song plays on the Pacer's stereo as the car enters the freeway.

The sky is still overcast as the Pacer passes a sign:
"WELCOME TO TOLEDO."

Michael watches the streets warily as he drives through town.

The Pacer passes a sign: "NOW LEAVING OHIO."

The sky brightens and the clouds break up. The sky turns blue, then orange, then deep, dark blue, then pitch black as the Pacer passes more road signs:

"WELCOME TO INDIANA - THE HOOSIER STATE"

"SOUTH BEND WELCOMES YOU"

"CHICAGO - CITY OF THE BIG SHOULDERS"

Michael keeps driving, even though he has trouble keeping his eyes open. The passing signs and oncoming headlights start to mingle with a waking dream.

"MADISON - WISCONSIN'S CAPITAL CITY"

INTERCUT WITH:

EXT. A STARK LANDSCAPE - DUSK

In the hallucination, Michael is in the middle of a stark, shadowy, endless landscape. He looks around, lost. There is an unsettling CRY in the distance. Michael turns to see where the cry has come from.

"NOW ENTERING IOWA"

In the dream, Michael turns to see his house, which stands by itself in the middle of the landscape. Scavenging birds circle above the house.

The garden ornament stands next to the front step. Its propeller wings spin wildly.

"ONLY 623 MILES TO WALL DRUG"

Michael tries to walk toward the house. He cannot move.

Michael attempts to lift his feet, but they are stuck to the ground.

A red sign with white lettering: "ON CURVES AHEAD"

The dim, luminous outline of a path appears beneath Michael's feet.

The path leads toward the horizon, away from Michael's house.

Another red sign: "REMEMBER, SONNY"

Michael finds he can lift his feet again. He starts to follow the path.

Michael stops and turns back toward the house.

The scavenging birds start to descend on the house.

"THAT RABBIT'S FOOT"

Michael tries to walk back to the house. Once more, his feet are stuck to the ground.

Michael turns away from the house.

He can lift his feet again.

"DIDN'T SAVE"

Michael starts walking down the path again, away from the house.

In the distance, at the end of the path, there is something under a bright light.

"THE BUNNY"

It is an old wooden chair. Suspended in the air, above and slightly to one side of the chair, is a revolver. If someone were sitting in the chair, the revolver would be pointing at their head.

"BURMA SHAVE"

Michael walks around the chair and gun, studying them from all angles. A CAR HORN blares.

EXT. A COUNTRY ROAD - MORNING

Michael wakes up behind the wheel of the Pacer. The CAR HORN blares again, over and over.

The Pacer sits in the middle of the road. It has come to a stop at an angle across both lanes of traffic. It blocks the path of a delivery truck.

Michael puts the car in gear and starts down the road.

There is a sign ahead: "JACK 'N ELLEN'S - GIFTS 'N SOUVENIRS."

EXT. GIFT SHOP PARKING LOT - DAY

The Pacer is parked in the lot. A huge white Lincoln Continental pulls in next to it. The Continental's door opens, and CEDRIC, a middle-aged man who resembles an overgrown infant in a ten-gallon hat, gets out and walks toward the gift shop.

INT. GIFT SHOP - DAY

A bell rings as Cedric strides in. Michael and ELLEN, a thirtyish woman in jeans and an old sweatshirt, stand at the counter in the middle of a conversation.

Cedric hovers in the doorway, listening.

MICHAEL

This kid told me about it in second grade. It's a chair, out west somewhere, and there's this gun set up in front of it. The gun's set to go off sometime between now and the year 2010, but nobody knows when exactly. Here. I drew a picture of it.

Michael flips through his notebook, looking for a page.

Cedric approaches the counter.

CEDRIC

Say, miss, you got any of those dashboard things, you know, the little ladies with the titties that light up?

ELLEN

Excuse me?

CEDRIC

You know...

Cedric cups his hands in front of his chest to suggest breasts, then flares his fingers in and out to suggest flashing lights.

Ellen rolls her eyes.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

Or how about those tumblers, you put ice in and the ladies' clothes disappear?

ELLEN

Aisle four, next to the musical dildos.

Oblivious to Ellen's sarcasm, Cedric heads down an aisle.

Michael has found the page he wants.

MICHAEL

This is what I'm looking for.

The notebook is open to a page with a pencil drawing of the chair and gun from Michael's dream.

CEDRIC

Hey, miss, I don't see any little ladies, any tumblers, or any dildos back here.

ELLEN

Listen, sir, I don't know what kind of shop you think this is—

CEDRIC

A souvenir shop. I can read the sign.

ELLEN

Well, what you're looking for are not souvenirs.

CEDRIC

Sure they are, if they say, "Hi from Cedar Rapids." According to this here magazine you folks carry erotic souvenirs.

Cedric shows Ellen a glossy magazine, "Extreme Tourism." On the cover is a photo of a young, smiling, all-American couple. They wear combat fatigues and have cameras around their necks. Behind them is the world's largest ball of string.

Ellen flips through the magazine.

ELLEN

Must have been the previous owners. That was ten years ago.

Ellen gives the magazine back to Cedric and turns to Michael.

ELLEN (CONT'D)

You were saying . . .

MICHAEL

You pay fifty cents to sit in the chair for one minute.

ELLEN

Why?

Cedric peers over Michael's shoulder to look at the drawing.

MICHAEL

It's like Russian roulette, I guess.

CEDRIC

You're tempting fate.

MICHAEL

Yeah.

ELLEN

I've never heard of such a thing.

CEDRIC

Looks like the Potato Creek Chair of Death.

MICHAEL

You've heard of it?

Cedric hands Michael the magazine.

CEDRIC

Page 32, I believe.

Michael opens the magazine to an article with the headline "Off the Beaten Track." A subhead reads, "America's 100 Weirdest Tourist Traps."

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

Decided I wanted to see all these places since I won the Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes.

Ellen scoffs in disbelief.

Michael turns the page. Next to the number 37 is a heading in bold type: "Chair of Death."

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

You don't believe me? Here's a picture of Ed McMahon handing me a giant check.

Cedric shows Ellen a photograph in his wallet.

In the magazine there is a photograph, obviously staged and shot in a studio, of a smiling, wholesome-looking tourist sitting in a chair, a gun pointed at his head. Below the photograph is a caption: "Probably a Myth."

Ellen studies the photograph in Cedric's wallet. Her skepticism fades.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

That check isn't real, of course. It's just for show. They send me the money in installments.

With his finger, Michael traces an arrow pointing to a map of the United States.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)
Since I won I quit my job, sold my house,
and now I'm traveling around the country
with my Mama.

Michael's finger comes to rest at the end of the arrow.
He moves his finger, revealing the words "South Dakota."

CEDRIC (CONT'D)
Want her to see all these weird things
before she dies.

Michael hands the magazine back to Cedric.

MICHAEL
Do you sell maps here?

ELLEN
Looks like we're out. We might have some
in back. There are tons of boxes back
there we haven't touched since we bought
the place.

Ellen goes into the back room.

Cedric amuses himself with a miniature snowscape.

Michael goes to the window and looks outside.

Cedric's white Continental sits in the parking lot.
Through the windshield, VALERIE is visible. She is a sad-
looking, elderly woman.

Cedric puts down the snowscape. Something else has
caught his eye.

It is Michael's notebook, still open to the picture of
the chair of death.

Cedric checks to make sure Michael isn't looking.

Michael continues to look at the Continental.

Cedric turns a page in the notebook, revealing an
intricately detailed picture, drawn with a number two
pencil, of a skeleton with a long, flaming sword raised
above its head.

Cedric flips a couple more pages. The same skeleton
appears in different poses on the next few pages. In
each successive drawing, the skeleton looks progressively
more mechanical and robot-like.

Cedric flips rapidly through the pages.

There are more drawings in the notebook, as well as verses of poetry and song lyrics.

Cedric closes the notebook and looks at the skull drawn on the cover.

Cedric regards Michael for a moment.

Michael is still staring out the window.

A moment passes. Barely visible through the windshield, Valerie stirs, perhaps turning to look at Michael.

MICHAEL

Who is that, in the car? Your mother?

CEDRIC

Why do you want to know?

Michael shrugs. Cedric walks over to stand next to Michael. He looks out the window at the Pacer.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

That your car?

MICHAEL

Yeah.

CEDRIC

Piece a junk.

INT. BACK ROOM - SAME

Ellen stands among several open cardboard boxes in the back room. She opens another box and takes something out.

It is a tumbler with a picture of a tan, muscular man wearing only bikini briefs. Ellen turns the tumbler. Lettering spells out, "Hi from Cedar Rapids."

INT. GIFT SHOP - SAME

Cedric and Michael gaze out the window.

CEDRIC

You're from Ohio, then.

MICHAEL
How'd you know?

CEDRIC
Your plates. Boy are you jumpy. What
are you doing in Iowa all by yourself?
Run away from home?

MICHAEL
Never mind.

CEDRIC
Look at that.

Cedric points at something.

EXT. GIFT SHOP PARKING LOT - DAY

An Iowa state patrol car comes to a stop a short distance
from the Pacer and the Continental.

INT. GIFT SHOP - DAY

Michael turns toward the back room.

MICHAEL
Haven't you found it yet?

ELLEN (O.S.)
I'm looking!

An Iowa state TROOPER emerges from the patrol car.

In the back room, Ellen opens a box and looks inside.
She finds a road map.

The trooper is circling the Pacer.

Cedric observes the trooper as well as Michael's
reaction.

Ellen emerges from the back room carrying a road map.

ELLEN (CONT'D)
I found one. I don't know if it's any
good, though. It's at least twenty years
old.

The trooper looks closely at Michael's license plates.

MICHAEL

I don't care.

ELLEN

The roads have all probably changed.

The trooper starts walking toward the front door of the shop.

ELLEN (CONT'D)

There's an Amoco just down the street. I bet their maps are—

Michael slams a bill down, takes the map from Ellen, and starts around the counter.

ELLEN (CONT'D)

Wait, wait. Where are you going?

Michael goes into the back room.

ELLEN (CONT'D)

That's employees only!

In the back room, Michael looks around for a way out.

In the front of the shop the BELL sounds as the trooper opens the front door.

Michael sees a door and dashes for it.

ELLEN (O.S.) (CONT'D)

You forgot your change!

Ellen comes into the back room, just in time to see the back door closing behind Michael.

EXT. GIFT SHOP PARKING LOT - DAY

Michael walks around the side of the building, stops at the corner, makes sure the coast is clear, then walks quickly to the Pacer. He gets in, starts the car, and drives away.

Valerie watches as the Pacer speeds off.

Cedric and the officer appear in the doorway of the shop, watching Michael's car disappear. Cedric looks down at something in his hands.

It is Michael's notebook.

EXT. A HIGHWAY - AFTERNOON

Cedric is driving the Continental. Valerie sits in the passenger seat.

CEDRIC
(singing)
You are a teapot, short and stout...

Cedric waits for Valerie to respond. She doesn't.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)
Come on, Mama. Sing the other part.

VALERIE
I don't remember.

CEDRIC
Sure you do. The bit about the spout.
"You are a teapot, short and stout..."

VALERIE
(singing)
And you are the spout where the tea comes
out.

CEDRIC
That's right. "You are a staircase, long
and tall."

Valerie looks at Cedric. Her irritation is starting to fade.

Cedric nods to urge her on.

VALERIE
And you are the rail so people don't
fall.

CEDRIC
You are a mailbox, made of tin.

VALERIE
And you are the postcard that gets put
in. Remember this one? You're a tomato
in a row.

CEDRIC
And you are the water that makes me grow.

Cedric laughs. In spite of herself, Valerie smiles.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

Do you remember any more?

VALERIE

That was at least thirty years ago.

CEDRIC

Must've come up with at least fifty different verses. Wasn't there one about an outhouse?

Valerie notices Michael's notebook sitting on the seat beside her. She picks it up and flips through it.

VALERIE

What is this?

CEDRIC

It belonged to the kid at the gift shop. He left it behind when he took off. Now, what was the one about the outhouse?

Valerie opens the notebook to one of Michael's drawings. In this drawing, a boy stands with his head bent forward so that his long hair hides his face. Behind him a man and woman sit in easy chairs watching television. They are viewed from behind; only the backs of their heads, their arms and their feet are visible. The man holds a can of beer and the woman holds a cigarette. The television screen shows a mechanical skeleton wielding a flaming sword.

Intrigued, Valerie turns the page.

In the next drawing, the man and woman face the television in the same pose. The boy is in the foreground, his face now turned upward. His hands cover his ears, his eyes are tightly closed, and his mouth is open in a scream. In the background, the cyborg skeleton bursts out of the television, swinging its sword at the man and woman in the easy chairs.

VALERIE

Did he draw these pictures himself?

CEDRIC

How would I know, Mama?

VALERIE

They're amazing. He's really talented.

CEDRIC

Really sick, if you ask me. The kid ought to see a psychiatrist.

VALERIE

Because he likes to draw skeletons?

CEDRIC

Exactly. What kind of kid gets his jollies from that?

VALERIE

I'm sure it's just a phase. Like that phase you went through when you were his age.

CEDRIC

What phase was that, Mama?

VALERIE

When you kept stealing the underwear from Mrs. Shumacher's clothesline.

CEDRIC

I did that once, Mama. Once. On a dare.

VALERIE

You think I didn't know about the hatbox full of panties under your bed?

Cedric is speechless.

VALERIE (CONT'D)

I'm just saying that's the kind of thing teenagers do. You stole panties, this boy draws flaming skulls.

CEDRIC

Don't compare me to that hooligan.

VALERIE

What was his name?

CEDRIC

I don't know. He's just some punk who ran off with his parents car. I never took anything of yours. I was a good kid. Still am.

VALERIE

He writes poetry, too. Listen-

Cedric snatches the notebook out of Valerie's hands and flings it into the back seat.

VALERIE (CONT'D)

Cedric!

CEDRIC

You'll get nightmares looking at that crap.

Valerie starts to reach for the notebook.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

No, Mama!

Startled, Valerie stops reaching for the notebook. She stares at the road ahead.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

You don't understand. That boy was weird. Mama?

Cedric tries to catch Valerie's eye, but she won't look at him.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

I'm just trying to look out for you. Like you always looked out for me.

Cedric turns his attention to the road ahead. They drive on in silence.

EXT. A CROSSROADS - NIGHT

The Pacer comes to a stop at a crossroads. A sign pointing down one road reads "U.S. HIGHWAY 67." The other sign reads "STATE HIGHWAY 42."

Inside the car, Michael is looking at the road map under the car's interior light. Apparently the map isn't much help; Michael sighs and folds it up.

He looks first at one sign, then the other.

He takes a coin from his pocket and flips it. He checks the result. He puts the car in gear.

The Pacer turns down Highway 42.

Michael drums on the dashboard, making up a song.

MICHAEL

(singing)

It's the last time
I have to listen to you.
It's the last time
I have to put up with you.
It's the last time
I have to look at your face.

The Pacer accelerates into the night.

EXT. HIGHWAY - NIGHT

The Continental passes a sign reading "HIGHWAY 42."

Cedric is driving. Valerie gazes out the window.

VALERIE

How soon do we stop for the night?

CEDRIC

Next Motel 6.

VALERIE

Why don't we stop somewhere nice for
once? Get a suite so I could have my own
room? We can afford it.

CEDRIC

What do you need your own room for? I
don't have anything you haven't already
seen.

Valerie is uncomfortable.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

What's wrong with Motel 6? They've got
those funny commercials on the radio.

They drive in silence for a moment.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)

Listen, Mama, we'll compromise. We can
stay at a Holiday Inn. It's a step up
from a Motel 6.

Light shines on Cedric's face, reflected by the rear view
mirror. He looks up at the mirror.

INT. THE PACER - SAME

Michael, in his car, is still singing.

MICHAEL
 (singing)
 Whatever I said
 It was never enough.

Michael sees the tail lights of a huge white car ahead of him.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
 COME ON!

Michael flashes his headlights.

INT. THE CONTINENTAL - SAME

The flashing headlights, reflected in the rear-view mirror, pulse on Cedric's face. Cedric looks out the rear window.

A pair of headlights loom just behind Cedric's car.

CEDRIC
 Jesus.

The Pacer follows closely behind the Continental.

Michael flashes his lights a couple more times.

MICHAEL
 (singing)
 Whatever I did,
 It was never the right stuff.

Cedric's eyes are fixed on the rear-view mirror.

CEDRIC
 Ought to slam on the brakes and teach him
 a lesson.

VALERIE
 Settle down, Cedric.

The Continental slows down and starts hogging the road. The Pacer bears to the left. The Continental bears to the left, blocking it. The Pacer bears right, and the Continental also bears right.

Finally, the Pacer pulls sharply onto the shoulder and starts to pass the Continental.

Michael continues singing over the sound of the engine.

MICHAEL
(singing)
Wherever I went,
You were riding my back.

The two cars speed down the road, side by side.

CEDRIC
So he wants to race.

Cedric accelerates.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)
I'll show him what this car can do.

VALERIE
Let him pass.

The Pacer and Continental are neck and neck.

Michael looks for an opportunity to pass.

MICHAEL
(singing)
Well it's over.
It's over and done.

There is an S-curve sign ahead.

VALERIE
Cedric, slow down.

CEDRIC
No one passes me, Mama.

VALERIE
There's a curve ahead.

CEDRIC
Good. Maybe next time he'll think twice
before-

VALERIE
Slow down or I'll never speak to you
again.

Cedric eases off the gas and exhales in frustration.

The Pacer passes the Continental.

MICHAEL
(singing)
Cuz it's the last time,
The last time.
Yeah!

As the Pacer pulls off the shoulder and back onto the road its tires spit gravel up in the air.

The gravel bounces off the Continental's windshield. Cedric winces.

CEDRIC
You happy, Mama? I could have passed
him, if...

Cedric looks ahead just in time to see the Pacer before it disappears around the curve. He catches sight of something.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)
Hey.

Cedric sees the Pacer's license plate.

CEDRIC (CONT'D)
Ohio plates.

VALERIE
What?

CEDRIC
Nothing. Goddamn kids.

Michael continues accelerating.

MICHAEL
Goddamn old people.

The Pacer leaves the Continental further and further behind as it races into the night.