

## Sidekick

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### Abstract

"Sidekick," an original short fiction work, explores the concept of belonging through its two main characters, Birch and Aggie, who struggle to find social acceptance. Birch's struggle is with paranoid schizophrenia. While he exhibits symptoms of delusions and experiences auditory complex perceptions, as do many with paranoid schizophrenia, unlike most, he also sees visual hallucinations. The general population might confuse his disability with dissociative identity disorder, or existing in multiple personality states. Instead, Birch seems cut off from reality, and while highly intelligent and educated, has been unable, especially in recent years, to maintain a successful life. The narrator, Aggie, is a retiree whose career was spent as an expatriate working with farming communities for a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Cambodia. She has recently returned to her home in Virginia. Her perceptions and experience are partially based on research and my observations while visiting Cambodia and my conversations with NGO employees there. The greater portion, however, is informed by my observations and experiences over the last twenty-one years as a member of the expatriate community in Doha, Qatar, one of the Gulf states. Usually, expatriates are motivated by imagining a better life abroad in status, salary, and/or in opportunities to make a meaningful contribution. Aggie's desires fit within the latter category, and as is common with expat life, her dreams met with obstacles, which require adjustment if the expat is to remain abroad. Aggie was unable to find a way to adjust. However, upon her return, she has realized that her home is no longer familiar to her, and while she has never quite fit into the fashionable society of Richmond's West End, her outsider status has become even more pronounced. Her first-person account relays her chance encounter at a café with the much younger Birch and the tentative attempts these two lonely people make in pursuing a possible platonic friendship.

**Keywords:** short fiction; humor; mystery; friendship; paranoid schizophrenia; expatriate; Virginia; Cambodia

## Coffee is the Ultimate Prop

Birch has just finished scoping out the parking lot from each of the windows inside Starbucks, a ritual he performs each time we meet here. He then sits down and reports to me in dead seriousness, “All’s clear.” Looking at his tall frame togged in army shirt, camouflage pants, and hiking boots, I start to wonder a bit, not for the first time, if we might actually be under threat, and he’s not the loose cannon I think he is. But those twenty-something girls, whose table he just peered over, stare at him, then turn to each other and whisper. It’s a pretty good guess they’re leaning more toward the loose cannon assessment.

Birch and I don’t sit next to each other or even at the same table—he won’t go for that. He’s concerned my germs might contaminate his coffee. I certainly look better groomed than he does, but I haven’t complained. It’s obvious the guy’s got issues. So we take up the two tables at a long burgundy booth in an alcove.

He takes a long drink through a straw of his grande Frappuccino—Mocha Light, I think it is today—and then rattles away at his laptop. He used to drink his coffee big and black, Americano style, but his doctor told him to cut down on caffeine, so he’s been trying what he calls the fru-fru drinks. I doubt that substituting a lot of sugar for a little caffeine is what Dr. Myers had in mind, but Birch says it’s all about process.

He says, still looking at the screen, “I’ve had a clear week so far, Aggie. No breaches.”

“So Hunter hasn’t shown up, huh?”

“Indeed, he has not.”

I say, “When was the last time he showed up?”

Birch grabs his backpack, jerks out a small black notebook and starts flipping pages like he’s searching for an antidote to save someone from poison. I wait for his answer without really being sure he intends to provide one. I used to assume he was angry when he moved in this fashion before realizing that much of the time it’s just a matter of compulsion.

“Three July, day before Independence Day 2005.”

I hesitate to ask the next question because it’s one of his most persistent symptoms, but he anticipates it and says, “And no voices, not even sounds, for a couple of weeks.”

“When exactly did you start your meds? This is a good sign. They might be helping.”

More page-flipping. “Nineteen May 2005.”

“A couple of months ago, then. Great. The medicine’s working.”

He slaps the book closed and lays it on the table all in one motion. “It’s not the meds. The conflation of the deaths of Adams and Jefferson on four July formed a garrison against the enemy.” He nods his head while looking at me and pats the table, one hand on each side of his laptop, in a soft drum roll. I’m often at a loss about how to react when Birch comes out with things like this. I try for a slight nod this time.

Starbucks was the place where Birch and I first met. It was a very inauspicious meeting. I was waiting outside the single-occupancy restroom, long enough to start thinking there had to be a woman in there—no man would take so long. I could hear water rushing. It sounded like Niagara Falls. Was she taking a shower? A memory flashed by of dark-haired Cham women lifting up one delicate foot at a time to wash in the sink. Finally the door opened and a very tall, lanky, young man stood in the doorway, facing me for just a moment. Droplets hung from the hair around his pale face, and his long red beard was wet at its curly ends. *Gross.*

Back at my table it was impossible not to notice him. Not only was he in fatigues, but he was pacing up and down the café fervently looking out of all the windows. When the barista came over to wipe my table—I cannot tolerate a grimy table—I noted the “man who was acting strangely.” She breezily informed me he had paranoid schizophrenia and came in all the time. “He’s fine,” she said as she flipped up her rag and stepped back to the coffee bar. My suspicion turned to relief and a little empathy. By the time most people reach my age, they know what it’s like to be misunderstood. I had recently experienced it anew, even been falsely accused, back in Cambodia.

A few minutes later everyone heard a sickening crunch just outside in the parking lot. One car had plowed into another that was backing out. All of us were at the windows, of course, guessing as to the seriousness of the matter. A couple of customers walked out to see. Fortunately, no one was hurt. Camouflage Man—that was my name for him then—had been standing at the back a little ways from the group, and as he returned to his chair, he knocked his coffee just enough for the liquid to spill over and start flowing down his table. His hands went up in a jerk, and his face screwed up in a look of pain, but strangely, he remained seated. I have a definite maternal streak—it even bought me some bad press at my former job, but old habits and all that—so I grabbed some napkins from the condiment bar and came over to clean the table. He did the most natural thing in the world: he picked up his laptop and held it so it wouldn’t get wet. For some reason that surprised me.

What surprised me further is how we fell into an intelligent conversation, albeit a table away from each other. I told him I was recently retired from working at an NGO in Cambodia, leaving out the fact I had returned under silent duress, of course, and from there we alighted on the entrepreneurship of Cambodians, the domino effect—Birch was positive the car accident caused his accident with the coffee—the butterfly effect, and First Cause. Every so often he would tap the table with the fingers of one hand in staccato tempo. Not loudly and not regularly. Just enough to remind me he was slightly off. But otherwise he seemed southern, gentlemanly in the way a life-long Richmond male can be, and, well...almost normal. I was fascinated. We started meeting almost weekly at Starbucks.

He’s back rattling away at his laptop. I feel relieved he hasn’t seen Hunter, the shadowy gray figure that in the past could keep him trapped for days in his apartment. The local paper’s in front of me, and I try getting past the headline “Golden Ridge Nursing Home Staff Sentenced for Resident Abuse,” but keep peeking at Birch. He pauses. Then he drops a bombshell. “But I’ve spotted his sidekick.”

“Hunter has a sidekick?” I ask. “I didn’t know that. You never said anything.”

His voice becomes clipped. “It’s my prerogative. I told you I’d been warned I shouldn’t be so willing to confide in people.”

“Birch, this is me talking to you here.” I tap my chest lightly. “The one you think would make a great grandma, remember? It was scams Dr. Myers warned about. Scams. He thought you were too vulnerable. I wouldn’t know the first thing about running a scam even if I wanted to. Why don’t you tell me about this sidekick?”

He looks at his screen and his voice softens. “The Doc doesn’t care too much for my blog idea.” He grabs his Frappuccino and sucks on the straw till his cheeks sink in. His brows are knitted as if it’s serious business.

“Well, I would agree with him there. It’s fine to write down your thoughts. Just don’t go public yet. Maybe someday.” I pause. “You know, you could write about Hunter and this sidekick. Not to send out yet.”

Birch admits he’s written some things already, but when I ask him to read some of it, he hems and haws before finally saying they’re not ready for public access. I wonder what on earth they must sound like.

“Well, just talk about it then. When did you first see the sidekick? I know about Hunter, but I’d like to hear about this sidekick.”

Birch starts to speak, but his eyes narrow as he looks at me full in the face. I try to keep an innocent smile on, relaxed, not too fervent. Neither of us says anything. Birch grunts and then goes on. I don’t know what he’s been thinking, but he’s obviously suspicious of me. I’m always curious about Birch—how his mind operates. But sometimes I feel guilty about it, as if maybe I don’t care for him enough.

Perhaps that's what he suspects. I do care for him. But which forms the better part of my friendliness—curiosity or caring? I would argue that it's caring. Heavens, I just spent over twenty years in Southeast Asia caring for people—I know about caring, don't I? But if I'm honest, I'm not always sure...in this case, I mean. It can be hard being friends with Birch.

Birch says the sidekick is a clerk at Larson's Tools.

I almost blurt out—*You mean he's real!*—before catching myself. I nod instead.

"We had an incident."

"What kind of incident?"

Birch heaves a big sigh. The story takes some false starts and turns, but the gist of what happened is that Birch picked up a drill set out of a sales bin, but it rang up at the regular price, and so the cashier insisted it had been placed by mistake in the bin. Birch wouldn't take no for an answer. That's when things got dicey.

"He practically called me a liar. To my face even. Told me the drill sets were all stacked up on aisle seven. He said there was no way it could have flipped across five aisles to aisle two where the sales bin was."

Birch called for the manager.

"That was wise," I say.

Birch called the cashier a dumbass.

"Not so wise."

"We can't all be like you West End ladyships," he says.

Usually when Birch starts with the West End ladyship business, an image pops into my head of a stylish blonde with a page-boy cut in a white jacket over a silk, taupe-colored blouse. She's pearl-laden and carries a large pocketbook matching her top. Friendly-looking, yet some enigma lies just under the surface. At times I argue fervently that I'm most definitely not a West End type. I don't mention how I and the other staff women working with Cambodian refugees in Thailand near the end of Pol Pot's reign had to sleep in the hall of an abandoned factory before they found us housing. But I do point to my Wal-Mart jeans and Khmer embroidered jacket. It does little good. This time I let it pass.

The manager comes over and solves the dilemma by giving the sales price to Birch. After he walks away, the cashier punches the register keys and the buttons on the debit-card reader like he's punching Birch's lights out. He barely hides his pleasure when the debit card gets rejected. Birch then insists he's punched the wrong buttons, and the next time, it takes.

"He says to me, 'Your card, sir,' like he's the frickin' Prince Regent."

"Well, I can see why he'd be upset, though he really shouldn't be. He's been embarrassed twice now."

Birch nods, but averts his eyes. I can tell there's more.

"What else happens?"

"Well, I tell him what his parents should have told him. I tell him he should look to his superiors for lessons on manners."

I close my eyes and exhale. "Oh, terrific—"

"I know what you're going to say. 'Most unwise,'" he says. "But the guy—his name's Cade. I saw it on his nametag. Cade something—the guy smiles. Kind of a grimace, really. But I think, well, maybe he's trying. I take my kit outside and start walking to my car. Turn around to look back at the store, and you're not going to believe this. He's up close to the window, staring straight at me. Got a hammer in his hands and he's tapping his palm with it, like this."

Birch shows me.

"You're kidding!"

"Swear to God."

I tell him I would have put a call in to the manager. And then, I ask him the question that's been bugging me this whole time. How does Birch figure Cade as Hunter's sidekick?

"He shows up everywhere."

"You mean Cade, right? Not Hunter."

"They both showed up at the same time on that date I told you about. Three July 2005."

I'm shocked. "You mean Cade was in your apartment—same as Hunter?"

"No, but he showed up outside my apartment. Walking along Roseneath. He kept looking at street signs. Looking for mine, no doubt."

I raise the probability of coincidence, but Birch will have none of it. He counts on his fingers as he recites the list of places where he's seen Cade: at the grocery store he frequents, the public library, the 7-Eleven, Scuffletown Park, and on the street by his apartment complex. Then finally on the actual ground of the apartment complex. Birch was walking on a brick pathway and suddenly Cade came around a corner, heading straight for him.

Birch says, "I didn't know what to do. I think I stood still, only for a second. Then I walked off the path, headed right and almost tripped because I had stepped into a dip in the grass. When I looked up again, he was gone. Looked around everywhere. Peaked around the corner where he had come from, too. Poof. The dude was nowhere. Vanished like Hunter does."

I'm skeptical. Has Birch seen the guy a couple of times and then hallucinated the rest?

"Why does that prove they're partners?"

"How else would he know my address?" Birch says.

"What about from the debit card?"

"Sure," Birch says, "that can be hacked, I guess." He takes a drink of coffee through his straw, his brow furrowed, considering the possibilities. Finally, he concludes, "But Cade's not that smart. It's gotta be Hunter who's helping here."

Warning bells go off in my brain. I leave alone the fact that Birch doesn't know Cade well enough to make a decision about his hacking ability. "Wait a minute, Birch." I'm trying to sound gentle. "Remember what you realized a few weeks ago? About Hunter, I mean. That Hunter wasn't real? At least that's what you told me."

He nods his head reluctantly. "Yeah, I remember. But I'm not sure about it now. It's weird that Cade knows where I hang out and sleep."

I mention calling the police about Cade. He screws his face up in distaste. I ask about the apartment manager, but Birch says he gets the feeling the manager suspects he's off kilter. No surprise there.

“Hey, what about this?” I say. “How about if I go with you to the manager. I’ll back you up. I’ll even present the case. And he can also check out your room—make sure no scoundrels are present.”

It takes a while for Birch to warm up to my brilliant idea, but he eventually agrees. I assume we will decide on a date in the near future. I walk over to the counter and buy a juice. When I return, I’m surprised to see that Birch is gone. All his stuff is gone. I look out the window in the front entrance and see him standing in the parking lot looking back at me through the glass. I open the door and say in a loud voice, “What’s going on?”

He yells, “Let’s go!”

I shouldn’t be surprised that I’m now in the car by myself. Birch refused to ride with me and insisted on walking all the way to his apartment. Said he’s always walked, and this time is no different. I’m fairly confident the real reason lies in his fear of germs. He just took off looking as if he was hiking the Appalachian Trail—wouldn’t even put his back pack in my car. He gave directions to his place, and I’m supposed to just wait there for him. It’s gotta be about four miles away. I wrote them down hoping he didn’t forget to tell me some detail. He can ramble a bit, and I’m still not used to the layout of the city. I haven’t been back to visit in about seven years, and things have changed so much. Even the Starbucks we just left is fairly new.

Though it’s the middle of summer, it’s been like an extended Virginia spring. The rain has stopped, and when the sun peeks out now and then, everything outside glistens with dewy freshness. Yet there are some dark clouds nearby that warn of more rain, and I’m concerned about Birch.

I drive to a point where I’m not too far from his apartment, but it has started to rain again and is coming down hard enough to make me do a U-turn and head back to find him, cursing his fussiness the whole way. I locate him about two or three miles back on the opposite side of the road alongside a hedge of laurels. Head down, he’s leaning forward, his arms swinging rhythmically while each step carries weight and determination. But once every so often he tilts as if he’s going to step off the sidewalk and into the street before correcting himself. Water runs in rivulets down his long jacket and drips off the combat hat he calls his boonie. A stranger would go to some length to stay out of his way. I swing the car around.

I pull up slowly right next to the sidewalk and turn on my hazard lights. Birch keeps walking, so I keep driving, trying to match his pace. It’s not that easy. Cars are forced to drive around me, but no one honks. That’s the Richmond way.

I push the button down for the passenger window so I can yell at Birch to get in. He’s already bent far down enough to see me, but stares as if I’m a complete stranger.

“No! I’m not getting in!” he shouts so as to be heard, I assume.

He keeps walking. I’m not sure he recognizes me. Maybe he thinks I’m a stranger. “Birch, it’s me. Aggie.”

He doesn’t look at me. “I know who it is. I’m not blind. I’m doing the power-walk thing. I’m not getting in.”

“Why? Come on, the car’s clean.” It’s starting to pour. Wind chops through the thick hedges next to Birch. I roll up the window nearly halfway. “Come on,” I plead, “the pollution coming down with the rain is much worse than the germs in my car.” I can’t believe I’m trying to reason in this way, but it’s the only thing I can think of besides lying and telling him I’m lost. I begin to consider lying.

He still refuses.

I yell over the noise of the cars, the wind, and the rain: “Birch, honestly, I don’t understand why you’re behaving this way. It’s insane!”

As soon as I say it, I realize what a dunderhead I am.

He stops, then I do. He comes right up to the open part of the passenger window and bends down to yell at me over and over that he is not insane. How could I call him that? I put the car in park. The hazards are still on. Rain is coming in at a slant now, and some of it is hitting the passenger seat. He's shaking his hands in the air and yelling at the top of his lungs. He uses the F-word. I hate the F-word. I say, "I'm so sorry," time and again. He takes a breath. I say again, "I'm so sorry, Birch. That wasn't what I meant."

"Why do you spend time with me if I'm insane," he yells.

"You're not insane. You're my friend."

"Why don't you visit all your other friends—all those West End ladyships?" He moves his face closer to the open part of the window. Water drips off of his chin onto the glass. He scrunches up his nose and in a high, taunting voice, says, "I'm sure they're all perfectly normal."

"I don't have other friends. You're it."

He twists his head so his ear is closer to the open part of the window, and I think at first he does it so he can hear me better. I start to repeat what I had just said, when he jerks straight up, opens the door to the back seat and hauls himself and his backpack inside, bringing with him the smell and slosh of rain.

I barely have time to look at him before hearing a short bleep from a siren. A police car has pulled up behind me and it stays there, red light twirling. I don't expect an answer, but I say out loud, "Why am I being stopped?" while I roll up the window, turn off the engine and the hazards, and then start rifling through my pocketbook for my wallet. I must have stayed too long by the side of the road. But the cop hasn't been around long enough to see it.

Birch says quietly, "Don't get your docs out yet. Just put your hands on the wheel." I'm surprised by the sudden turn he's taken. I look back at him. He's huddled down in the corner of the back seat, his hands folded together in his lap as if he's about to get scolded by the elementary-school principal. "Turn on your interior light since it's not too bright outside, and don't stare at him in the rearview mirror--or the side mirror, either. They get suspicious."

"You sure do know an awful lot about this," I say. I hear the accusing tone in my own voice.

"Law School," he says.

It's been a long wait. The policeman's been back and forth between our cars with my license and registration, and my whole body feels tired from staying in this one position with my hands on the wheel. He then surprises me by asking me to step outside and stand a few paces away from the car, facing the same direction I was traveling in. The rain has not cooperated, and it won't be long before my hair gets soaked. I'm thankful when he opens a black umbrella and hands it to me. Relieved, too. Surely this isn't how a cop treats a suspect. He's a head taller than I and wears an open yellow raincoat with a hood that goes over his cap. I can't tell how old he is, but he's not young. It's then I notice he's not looking at me. His eyes are on Birch.

"Ma'am, is that man sitting in the backseat bothering you?"

He's still looking at Birch even while I answer no. I'm compelled to turn my head and look at Birch, too. But he's sitting quietly. I can see through the rain that his hands are spread out on his thighs—to show he has nothing in them, I suppose. He's been staring straight ahead, but now looks up at us, smiles and nods. He looks more goofy than dangerous.

The cop is still staring at Birch and says, "Are you sure now? He looked pretty angry talking through your window a while ago."

He saw more than I realized. "Oh, he's fine," I say, using the phrase the barista used when I first saw Birch. "He's a friend of mine. We're on our way to, um...we're doing some research. He wanted to walk, but I insisted he ride with me. He's a health freak." We're talking louder than usual because of the rain, and I'm hoping Birch doesn't hear me right now.

The cop doesn't quite buy it. This time he looks at me. "Why, then, is he sitting in the back?"

"Oh, he does that. He wants to visually seize the moment, and he can do it better from the back seat."

The cop slowly repeats, "Visually seize the moment." His facial expression is stone cold, and his dark eyes remain directly on my face. He's definitely not buying this.

"Yes, sir. I mean the moment in the natural environment. The rain, I mean. It's more real this way. Seizing the moment, sir. You know, '*carpe diem*' and all that." I try my best to make this babbling seem somewhat logical by finally saying, "He's studying the rain in a real-moment sort of way."

"Huh. So, no problem, then?" He's still looking hard at me. I fiddle with the umbrella handle to avoid meeting his eyes.

"No, sir."

Static and a dispatcher's voice come from somewhere near his belt. He touches a black mic hooked to a cord against his raincoat and quickly spouts off some numbers before saying, "is responding." He barks at me, "I'll take that now," meaning the umbrella, and tells me to get back in the car and wait for him to pass before getting into the lane. Then he races to his car.

"Virginia cops sure haven't changed much," I say when getting back into the car. Everything feels damp and sticky. "Still suspicious about everything. So you went to law school?" The cop whizzes by with his siren blaring.

"How come you don't have any friends?" says Birch.

"Oh. Well, I don't know...I guess I do have friends, but they're from all over the world. Right now they're in Cambodia. Maybe some-time down the road I'll see one or two of them, but most I'll probably never see again."

I explain to Birch that friends you make as an expat are usually not life-long friends—you leave, they leave, and there are too many miles and time zones between and too many people who have been waiting for your return home, though that wasn't the case with me.

"Yeah, I get it," Birch says from the back. "Like friends on the school debate team. You think you'll know them forever, but a few years later, you're not sure of the names." I hear a slight sawing sound and glance at him through the rearview mirror to see that he's pulling one of the zippers on his backpack up and down, up and down.

I don't tell him the situation with my friends in Cambodia is more complex than that. You could say I left under a cloud. I could blame a lot of things on Erika, the young person I was training to work with farm families. Things seemed to go well, but then I heard from my boss she had complained I dragged around, spent too much time socially with each family, and that I wasn't efficient with deliveries or in solving problems. She thought it serious enough to request a new trainer.

Though the boss made a record of Erika's complaint, he didn't see things her way at the time. But soon after came a blow-up over tools that seemed to give him doubt about me. While my trainee was on another project, I had delivered—at least I thought I had—a number of carbon steel Bypass pruning shears with a rotating handle to some of the families on my route. Most of the pruning shears we had been handing out prior to this were made of aluminum—lightweight for women and children, but they didn't last long. And they certainly didn't sport a rotating handle. These people didn't own much so a big to-do was made out of this new shipment—purchased through a donation specifically for tools.

Five Cambodian families said they never got theirs—but I checked my chart and everyone was marked off. I went back to the supply barn—there were no extra shears. A couple of the families were understanding and said they would use the aluminum shears for now, but the rest of them, especially the Tok family, fussed and fussed about it. Eventually I was put to office work, and a colleague took over my sector temporarily until Erika finished her training and could take over. She couldn't hide her smirk when she saw me entering data in the office.



Soon I gave notice of my retirement. I had planned to work a few more years. I actually still believed my boss would try to talk me out of it. But he accepted it easily. So did everyone else. They congratulated me as if it was the easiest thing in the world—wishing me the best in this “new phase” in my life. To me it sounded as if they believed I had given my best years, now it was time to move on—fade into passivity. It’s funny how other people are the ones to decide this about you.

Birch won’t let it go. Still working the zipper, he asks about friends in Richmond. I skirt around his question.

“I came back every year to visit while my folks were alive. I’m the youngest. The oldest brother passed, too. I’ve told you about him. We were very close. I’ve got another brother who lives in Arkansas and a sister in Iowa.”

“That’s family,” he says. “Friends?” I can tell he went to law school.

“Well, growing up, I didn’t quite fit in with people my age in Richmond. I was a bit nerdy, but mostly it was because almost all of them were from Virginia, and I wasn’t. My parents were from the Carolinas, and we had lived in a lot of different states because my dad was in sales at the time.”

Birch puts on an exaggerated proper Richmond accent, “You mean your family’s not a First Family of Virginia? Why my dear, I assumed you were. I’m uncertain if we can continue our association with one another.”

I laugh. “We might as well have been an FFV. My parents were pretty strict, especially about manners. Especially Mother. She had that old-fashioned sensibility.”

I hear cursing from the back. The zipper has stuck, and fortunately, I don’t have to explain further. What is difficult for me to fathom is why I still can’t find my niche here even as an adult. It seems the only thing people are interested in when it comes to my having worked in Cambodia all these years, is whether it’s safe. They mean from terrorists, of course. Crime doesn’t enter into the vocabulary these days. Once I assure them that Siem Reap, where I lived, is quite safe, their curiosity is satisfied, and they feel free to go on about their children, or their grandchildren, and their myriad number of activities. I listen as well as I can and ask questions. But after so many conversations that run this way, I must admit to being bored, and things just seem to peter out.

Maybe if I were married or had children, things would be different. I don’t know. Finding a mate just never seemed to work out. I don’t mind so much telling Birch these things—at least I don’t think I do. But it’s the recent bouts of loneliness at night and the crying jags I get without any warning that I don’t want to talk about. I would get homesick sometimes in Cambodia, but I never got lonely like this.

“We’re getting close,” says Birch. “Slow down. Be on the lookout for Cade.”

I realize Birch and I have missed the simplest of things: I have no idea what Cade looks like. I already know that he sees Hunter as a tall shadowy man, all gray—long gray coat, gray suit, gray dress hat, gray hair, and a grayish pallor to his skin. The stuff of nightmares. I believe I’ll never see Hunter. Birch tells me Cade is medium height and has sandy brown hair cut close to the scalp, which sounds like a million other guys, except that he wears a goatee. I have my doubts about seeing Cade, too. I don’t have any problem believing Birch got into a tit for tat with a cashier, but I strongly suspect it ended back at the store.

Birch directs me into a small parking lot in back of two simple three-story brick buildings with slanted roofs. Like the surrounding neighborhood the complex has green lawns, dotted with maples and oaks. The rain has lightened somewhat, but is more than a drizzle, and because I left my umbrella at home, as usual, I hold my jacket up over my head and shoulders as we make for the back door of the building to the west of us. I assume Birch is leading us to the manager’s apartment, but he changes his mind and wants us to stop off first at his place, so we can make ourselves a little more presentable, he argues. It doesn’t take much to persuade me. Parts of my hair feel glued to my head, and besides, I’ve often wondered what Birch’s place is like.

The hall he lives on has indoor-outdoor blue and yellow carpeting. His place is a corner one-bedroom apartment on the bottom floor with a heavy, wooden front door. The first thing we do upon entering is to make sure no one is in the apartment. It doesn't take long since it's on the small side. As I check behind the long curtains in the front room, and even behind the sofa, I can hear Birch opening closet doors in his bedroom. I'm not surprised the place is empty, but I have to admit I'm relieved, too. The condition of things reflects Birch in recovery. The kitchen is spotless and tidy, its pinkish granite counters gleaming. This is Birch in medicinal treatment. On top of the dining table, however, is every kind of paper and book and opened and unopened bags of snacks, and I can see through the open door of the bedroom that clothes and underwear have been tossed all over the room and bed. That's Birch pre-medicinal treatment.

We both are leaking water on the wood floor. Birch opens a cabinet containing some shelves in the hall and takes out a few dark brown, well-worn bachelor towels. He hands me a large one. I ask to use the bathroom, which is between the kitchen and the family room. It, too, shows Birch in transition. The tub, toilet, and wood floor are very clean. A window graced by what looks like tall holly bushes reveals a bit of the parking lot. The glass is spotless, too. But a variety of plastic and metal hand razors and electric shavers are scattered over the counter. One look at Birch's long red beard is enough to conclude he really doesn't shave, but maybe he considers it a great deal without acting on it. The sink covered in soap scum and stains of some sort looks like it hasn't seen any cleaning for six months, maybe a year.

After using the toilet, I'm gingerly rinsing the soap from my hands, trying not to touch anything, when light and shadow flicker across the mirror in front of me. I look towards the window and see the shrubbery divide. A man's face and upper body appear. I immediately notice the goatee and the nearly shaven head. It has to be Cade. A wordless yell escapes from my mouth. He brings up a crowbar and positions it so as to jimmy the window from its casing. He's moving fast, much faster than I can. With wet hands I unlock the bathroom door and bump against the door frame as I push myself through the opening, screaming at the top of my lungs. Birch stands in the open doorway of his bedroom, shouting "What's wrong?!" I don't stop, but head for the door to the apartment. I can't think and can only manage to shout one word: "Sidekick!"

I am numb with shock. The door seems heavy as I open it, and I move out into the hall as if wading in water. Though it's difficult, and I have no idea where I'm going, I work my way in the direction opposite to the parking lot. The sound of breaking glass comes from far away. I don't know where Birch is until he overtakes me and yells, "This way." I am too weighted down to feel relieved. Two young boys run up an interior staircase as we pass by. They move as if flying, while I am still in water. One calls for his mother. Birch and I soon come through an exit door that takes us outside in front of the building. He runs to the right, in the direction of the second building, yelling, "Manager's this way."

The rain has lightened to a sprinkle. Cool air helps to clear my head. I realize I've left my pocketbook and keys back in the apartment and wonder if I left the water on. And as I'm running behind Birch, I wonder, too, if Hunter might actually be as real as Cade.