

Read an excerpt from “Crossing Lake Serene on a Dare,” from Pete Mesling’s debut fiction collection, *None So Deaf*:

The sky was beginning to lose daylight, which gave rise to long shadows all around the Clarris place. For every forgotten automobile and pile of junk in the yard, Timothy’s imagination placed half a dozen terrible possibilities. So many places for an axe murderer to hide. Or a werewolf. Soon he’d be shuffling through that maze of shadows and debris. His stomach turned at the thought.

When he was close enough to the dock, he reached for a railing to help him rotate the ferry and back it into place. It was awkward work, but eventually he got the craft secured. He stepped onto dry land and faced Farley Clarris’s front porch. A stand of trees, blackened by dusk, kept watch from behind the house.

All he had to do was collect something—anything—that would prove he had been not only on the Clarris property but in the house itself. First he’d need to convince his legs to carry him into the yard.

A clicking sound behind him, followed by a wooden creak. The raft. It wasn’t secure after all. It had come loose and was floating away on dark water. Timothy didn’t like water to begin with, and Lake Serene held a special terror for him. According to Jason, the lake was home to a fifty-pound sturgeon nicknamed Big Al by the locals, after the character from *Happy Days*. There was no way he was going after that raft.

“Shit,” he muttered and balled his sweaty hands into fists.

Perhaps egged on by anger and frustration, he quickly strode into the yard.

He didn’t see any light from within the two-story house, half of its clapboards dangling or missing. With any luck, Farley was away from home. It seemed too early for him to be in bed.

Of course, he might be in the basement, which is where he supposedly performed surgery on stray animals. It was one of several strange hobbies the man was said to have. Timothy hated the idea of rummaging through Farley’s belongings while he was only a flight of stairs away. But there was a week’s worth of free carnival amusements at the end of this nightmare. He’d be able to ride the Scoop-n-Dip until he puked if he wanted. He could hog the Wild Ripper until the midway closed each night. It would all be worth a dash through Farley’s house in search of just the right keepsake.

He threaded through weeds and clutter to the front steps, where he paused to think about what he should look for once inside. That part of the dare had seemed like such a simple task. But now, up against the reality of wandering in the dark through a house he’d never been in, the odds of finding an object that would prove he was in the house seemed hopeless.

The door was unlocked, which made part of his job easier, but it also meant Farley was probably home. Timothy rubbed goose bumps out of his arms and stepped inside. The sun hadn’t set completely, but the house was plenty dark, especially considering that it was even messier inside than out. Timothy wasn’t sure what he kept brushing against as he moved through the main floor. A stack of newspapers or magazines, he guessed at one point. A foot stool or end table was all he could think of when his knee cracked against something in what he assumed was the living room.

Soon he was in the kitchen. Less sunlight fell into this part of the house, but the smell of a recently cooked meal gave it away. He couldn’t think of anything from a kitchen that might prove he’d been here. He stared across the room. There appeared to be a small table, a few chairs set around it. And a strange pattern in the wallpaper. He took a step closer and realized it wasn’t

wallpaper he was seeing. It was the silhouette of a man occupying the far chair.

Timothy wanted to die for the first time in his life. He saw nothing but dead ends. If he didn't get out of there, the man might rise from his chair, hobble over to him and kill him in some horrible way. If he ran, he'd get lost in the woods to the west of Farley's land, searching for a way around the lake. Or he'd be forced to brave the waters that were home to Big Al, risking death by sturgeon attack or drowning. The way to the east wasn't even worth contemplating. There was nothing in that direction but brambles and gullies just waiting to snare a young boy. To the south, nothing but open roads. He didn't care for his options. But his legs wanted him out of that kitchen. Without giving his brain the signal, he was sidestepping to the doorway he'd come through.

"Boy," the man in the chair said. Timothy shuddered at the gravelly sound of his voice. "Get your ass over here."

The command led to a struggle in Timothy's mind. Yes, twelve was a fine age in many ways, but it was also an awkward, trying age. He was still young enough to want to obey his elders and yet not so young he couldn't smell danger. Farley was probably harmless. Deep down, Timothy had known that all along. He wouldn't have set foot in the man's house if he'd truly believed he was as wicked as he was in the stories people told. But seeing him sitting in the dark at his kitchen table, Timothy was convinced Farley Clarris was a cutter of animals—maybe an eater of children. Almost anything seemed possible.

But he went to him, took a seat across the table from him. Farley was a big man. Bigger than Timothy's father. Timothy had only seen him behind the wheel of his rusted-out pickup truck prior to this. He was even bigger up close.

"What the hell do you want in my house?" Farley had a glass of something in front of him, and his hands looked dark, stained.

"It was a dare." Timothy said nervously. "I'm supposed to bring back something that proves I was in here."

"Steal, you mean." Timothy's head drooped. "And what made this such a daring break-in, if you don't mind my asking? Am I supposed to be some kind of vampire?"

Honesty had felt like the right course up until now. Timothy wondered if he should soften the truth for this question. But like his feet, his tongue sometimes had a mind of its own. "There are stories about what you do."

"Are there, now? What's your name, son?"

"Timothy."

"I'll tell you what, Timothy. I ain't got a thing planned this evening. I'd love to hear one or two of them stories."

Timothy swallowed hard before continuing. "Um, some kids say you trap animals in the woods, stray pets and coons and such. That you ... cut them up to learn how they work, so you can be more like them."

Farley laughed, and it made him sound like a different man. "Sometimes a lie holds a grain of truth." He clicked a table lamp on, which blinded Timothy temporarily. His hands truly were stained, and it looked like dried blood. "I'm not a good role model, Timothy. I've made a real mess of things. But I'm not a monster."

"I didn't mean—"

"Had a boy about your age once, in fact." Farley paused to take a drink. "Good kid, he was. Hard worker. Good at figuring things out." He looked up to the ceiling, and his eyes pooled with tears. Timothy's gut clenched. "His mother always thought I gave the boy too much

responsibility, but Paul could handle just about any job he was thrown. When a boy's real good at something, you understand, it's only natural to give him more of that kind of thing to do.

"Well, Paul was best at fixing vehicles, so I started lending him out to farmers. Earned himself a real solid reputation, too, but he met his match with old man Welter's grain auger. Paul set about taking the damn thing apart to clear a jam. A big old rock had got wedged between the blade and the chute." He took another drink, a longer one this time. "But he forgot to disconnect the hydraulics, and he accidentally kicked the power switch. Made sausage out of the left half of him." He wiped booze from his lips with the back of a trembling hand.

"Um, Mr. Clarris, I should probably be going. I—"

"I was a vet back in those days, Timothy. Best animal doc in the county, if I say so myself. But not good enough. Jess Welter came flying into my yard with his Ford Bronco, so I knew something was up right away. He told me the news, and I rode back with him to his dad's place. God knows how long it would have taken to get an ambulance out there, so I went ahead and started working on Paul myself.

"Course, I lost him, and my wife never did forgive me. She was out of the house in under three weeks. I guess if God wanted me to be alone, he's pretty fat and happy up there in his penthouse suite, because I'm as alone as they come."

"You're not alone right now." It came out sounding lame, but Timothy felt he should say something.

"It's awful nice of you to say that, son, but you're only passing through." Timothy thought it was silly to expect people to do much more than that, but he didn't say so. "The reason I bring all this up is because you mentioned about my cutting on animals." Farley lifted his hands and turned them in the lamplight. "It's true I do a little surgery now and again, but it's only to help creatures who've had a piece of bad luck fall on them. A broken wing, a severed paw, a bad bite. It can be a tough life out in those woods. Even the strongest among us need help from time to time.

"You sit tight for a minute, young man, while I wash my hands and get you a photo of my boy that you can take to town as proof that you were inside spooky old Farley Clarris's house."

He got up with some effort and limped out of the room toward a back area of the house Timothy hadn't been to yet. Timothy's head was a stew of conflicting thoughts. He felt ashamed for having bought into such half-baked assumptions about Farley. But at the same time, the man *was* odd. The dare suddenly seemed stupid. It wasn't as if his dad couldn't afford to buy him a carnival pass. And Jason admitted to being as scared of the Clarris place as Timothy had been. What was there to prove? He didn't see any reason to take up more of Mr. Clarris's time and risk stirring up more painful memories, so he left the table as quietly as possible and retraced his steps through the cluttered house to the front door.