

1. The Ballad Of Rick and Lou

“Where will this lead me?” These are the first words of Nefarious Twit’s book *Where the Ladder Leads*.

They are also the first words of this book.

Neither of these facts is too terribly important. However, these words happen to be the last words that Rick Lime reads before tearing out the last page of a book that does not belong to him. So it seemed worth mentioning. Because Rick Lime likes very much tearing out the last pages of books. This is important. The book Rick is currently disfiguring is the aforementioned *Where The Ladder Leads*, written, as previously indicated, by Nefarious Twit. The words “Where will this lead me?” are not only the first words of said book but also the last. Many people who read the book enjoy the fact that it begins and ends with the same sentence. They find this awfully charming and slick or at the very least feel that it grants Twit’s work a satisfying sense of symmetry. Many people are easily entertained. Rick Lime does not share this feeling.

Not toward Twit or Twit’s work or towards much else. He does not like the book’s ending or for that matter, and unsurprisingly, the book’s identical beginning. But it is the ending especially that troubles him. Truth be told, he doesn’t like how most things end. Tonight for instance isn’t shaping up much the way he would prefer it to.

The book he’s just dismembered, perfected is the way Rick looks at it, is the property of the Davidston Middle School library in Tucson, Arizona. Rick Lime is a twenty-seven year old man standing in a middle school library at 11:32 at night in the dark. This is trespassing. Rick is a slightly skinny man with a cobble of dark hair who looks like he can play electric guitar. He cannot. There in the school library with the only light coming from the glow of the red exit signs hanging above the doors he looks like some sort of vagrant vampire. He isn’t. The lights turn on. He is also not alone.

“There he is,” a voice announces from the direction of the library’s entrance. Rick looks up at the top of the stairs where the door and apparently the light switch are located, and finds two men, roughly his own age, smiling back at him. They are his friends Mike and Zack.

“Told you he’d be here,” Mike says.

“Turn the light off, you’re going to trigger an alarm or something,” Zack tells him.

“There’s no alarm attached to the lights,” Rick says. Mike and Zack start making their way down the steps toward Rick and he quickly puts the now perfected copy of Twit’s book back on the shelf.

“Seriously guys,” Zack says. “I think we should probably think about getting out of here soon.”

“You’re such as sniveling fuck,” Mike says. This is true. Zack is a sniveling fuck. While this description is a bit unsophisticated, no other two words better describe Zack. By all accounts, he is a distinguished sniveling fuck. But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t have a point.

“He’s got a point,” Rick says. “We should probably split, all the noise we’re making.” It’s Sunday night and someone had the great idea of breaking into their old middle school and burning it to the ground. Of course, once they actually got there the nostalgia hit like good ether. It’s been more than ten years since any of them have been back. So their attempt at arson turns into mere petty vandalism. Some naughty words on a chalkboard. Some missing trophies from the trophy case. Some computers tossed down a few staircases. Nothing grandiose. Now that they’re old enough to buy beer and get lower car insurance anything more seems too risky. Now that Rick’s older none of this seems too interesting. But still, he is in library surrounded by books that could desperately use perfecting. A library that includes the work of Nefarious Twit. “But on second thought,” Rick says. “Zack, shut the fuck up.”

“Come on,” Zack whines.

“No, he’s right, you should be quiet,” Mike tells him.

“We’ll go in a couple minutes, alright?” Rick says. “I just want to look at some more books while we’re here.”

“You writing dirty words in ‘em?” Mike asks through a grin.

“Nothing that high minded,” Rick says.

“Okay,” Mike says. “But if you want to write pussy fart in a Judy Blume book give me a holler. I’ll be in the picture book section.”

Rick offers a two-finger salute that sends Mike and Zack on their way. He waits until he’s out of their view then goes back to the bookshelves. Rick Lime developed his strange fetish of perfecting books sometime back in the third grade. This is when it struck him that the endings of most books just didn’t deliver. All the authors trying to wrap up everything so neat and nicely and it felt so flat. Like a rapturous crescendo followed by an off key squeal. These endings ruined an otherwise wonderful, worthwhile work. The books, the stories, they had to be saved, fixed, perfected. After reaching this rather oblique epiphany in the third grade, Rick has been compelled to tear out unsatisfactory last pages whenever he comes across them.

Now he’s working his way through alphabetically, perfecting a

few titles in every section, knowing exactly where it will take him. He finds himself at the letter T. Twain, Mark. Twit, Nefarious. Twit keeps good company. He's not surprised to find that they don't have Twit's second most popular book, *Dark Ladder*. That book is for adults. But there are three copies of the children's classic *Where the Ladder Leads*. Two if you don't count the one he's already altered.

He takes the one in the middle of the shelf. He runs his pointer finger along its stiff spine, turns it reverently to look at its cover. He looks past the illustration and he looks past the title and he stares at the name on the top. Nefarious Twit. It feels like that stupid name has been branded behind his eyes. He opens the book and goes right to the last page. To the last line.

Then he tears the last page of it out like he's removing malignant tissue and places it back on the shelf. Next he picks up the other untouched copy and repeats the process, opening it and perfecting it. He's about to put it back when something hard happens to his face. Instead of returning it to the shelf he rips out the book's second to last page. Then the next. He continues de-paging the thing until finally deciding to junk the endeavor by tearing the whole book in half. Finding this deeply rewarding he picks up another copy and does the same thing. After that he grabs the only remaining book and is about to perfect it into pieces when he realizes Mike and Zack have come back. They stare at him, not saying anything at first.

"You okay there?" Zack asks.

Mike knows Rick a little better and tells Zack, "He's fine, man. He just got a thing with books."

"Yeah," Zack says. "Looks like it."

Rick drops the book to the floor so it can be with its butchered brethren. "What do you guys want to do now?" Rick asks.

"Well, you know what my vote's for," Zack says.

"You wanna take off?" Mike asks Rick.

"Yeah, might as well. I need to see Lou anyways," Rick tells him.

"Where is he?" Mike asks.

"Lou? I dunno, probably at the house," Rick answers.

"Yeah, but why isn't he out right now with us?"

"I think he's just taking it easy tonight."

"You ask me I'm glad he's not here," Zack adds. "That guy's fucking nuts."

Mike smacks him on the chest. "Dude, shut the hell up."

"What? It's true," Zack tells him.

"You don't even know my brother, alright?" Rick says. "So just do me a kindness and shut up on the subject, okay?"

"Fine, okay," Zack says. "He just makes me nervous sometimes. Jesus."

Rick looks at him until Zack turns away. Satisfied, Rick next turns his attentions to pawing through his overcoat's inner pocket. He sifts around for something small and black but doesn't seem to find it. He tries another pocket. Nothing. With his head down a bit of his corkscrew hair hangs over and half blocks his eyes. He pulls back a handful of the stuff dutifully and keeps searching. Nothing, still nothing. But he's sure they're there. He's certain he brought them. At least a few, he doesn't really want a lot. One or two pills will do the trick. At least it'll make the night more entertaining.

"Freeze motherfuckers." This sounds like perfectly good advice and the three of them do exactly that. Eyes wide and hands up. But then they hear laughter. Turning around they follow the voice up to the door of the library. Standing at the top of the staircase is Rick's brother Lou. "Feeling nervous, Zack?" he asks.

"He's fucking nuts," Zack replies. Rick doesn't yell at him for it. He just shakes his head and starts laughing. So does Mike. Be that as it may, when Rick looks up and sees Lou smiling like some death's head alligator at the top of the staircase, Rick knows it's going to be bad. Tonight, especially tonight, with Lou it's going to be bad. But he's here now and there's nothing he can do about it.

Lou Lime, twenty-one years old, is Rick's younger half brother. He is a tall but somewhat hunched man with long, greasy, straw-colored hair who looks like he can hot-wire a car. He can, incidentally. Due to his poor posture Lou is taller than he appears to be and when he descends the staircase to meet his brother and the others he gives the unintended impression that he is lumbering. If at times Rick looks like some sort of homeless, shopping cart Dracula, as earlier in this book he did, then his brother Lou certainly can be described, at times, as resembling a destitute, shambling, soup kitchen Frankenstein's monster. This means that the Lime brothers are the kind of brothers that don't look alike unless you're really looking for it. It also means that both could improve their respective grooming and shaving habits as well as benefit from wardrobes not put together exclusively from thrift stores.

"Where you been all night, man?" Mike asks Lou.

"Nowhere really," Lou tells him. "Somebody didn't think to tell me where you were going, so I was just hanging by myself." Lou says looking at Rick.

"I thought maybe you should take it easy tonight, with all that's going on—"

"I don't care, I'm just foolin' around," Lou interrupts Rick. "Besides, I found you guys. Thanks for the text Mike. What are we doing here anyways?"

Rick shoots a little stink eye at Mike who doesn't appear to notice. "Came back for nostalgia," Mike tells Lou. "Nostalgia, really?"

Lou says. "This place is a graveyard."

"That's what graveyards are for," Rick says.

"Well, excuse the holy hell outta me," Lou says. "Is this all you guys are gonna do?"

No one says anything.

"Guess that makes it unanimous," Rick says. "This has been about as much fun as getting a catheter put in. Maybe we should just call it a night."

"Yeah, it's not like we were really going to burn this place down," Zack enters the conversation using this. As mentioned before, Zack really doesn't know Lou.

"Really?" Lou's eyes light up. Rick turns back and gives Zack a grey look. "And you weren't gonna let me tag along for this?"

"No, I didn't want you tagging along because we're not actually gonna do it," Rick says.

"Why not?" Lou says. "It sounds like a pretty good fuckin' idea to me."

"Yeah, I bet it does you goddamn pyro, but we're not gonna do it because I see no point in it. We burn down Davidston Middle School, big deal. They'll just build a new school right over the ashes of this one."

"It's what the act symbolizes," Lou says.

"It doesn't symbolize shit Lou, it's just wanton destruction."

"So what if it is? I think a little wanton destruction is what we all need right about now. Come on, you hate this school."

"We're not wrecking a whole school. That's stupid even by our standards."

"School, nobody ever learnt nothin' at school," Lou says. "Give me a reason why we shouldn't just burn this whole place down."

"I'm not going to stand around while you guys burn this place up," Zack tells them. "Shut the fuck up Zack, nobody asked you," Rick delicately addresses his friend's concerns. Then he returns to planning the evening with Lou. "Look, I know how you're feeling, I feel like letting loose too. But let's keep this stuff small scale tonight. Alright? We should probably get the hell out of here anyways, somebody's bound to come."

"Alright," Lou says. "I guess you're the boss." He says it in that perfect way that only little brothers can when addressing their older siblings.

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"The *I guess you're the boss.* thing," he says Lou's line in a pissy falsetto. Lou rolls his eyes at him like he's twelve. "And don't roll your goddamn eyes at me. Alright? I can't stand it when you roll your eyes. It makes you look like some prissy little girl. Now come on."

Rick leads them out the library's door. The four find themselves trudging through the dark, empty halls of the school. Moonlight spilling through massive windows casts a weird gleam on the reflective floors beneath their feet. This moonlight washes everything over in a benthos blue weak iridescence. Paired with the long cylindrical shape of the halls it gives the effect of walking around the inside of a sunken submarine. At least Rick thinks so.

"Where are we going?" Zack asks.

"I dunno, me and Lou should probably be getting home soon," Rick tells him. "We got something we gotta do in the morning."

"You switching to the early shift at the warehouse or something?" Mike asks.

"No, still on nights, man. But I am not coming in tomorrow. Got something I have to do real early tomorrow with Lou. Actually got a real busy day ahead of us."

"You tell the boss yet?" Mike asks.

"Not yet, but I will. Do me a favor and don't say anything, just let me call it in."

"Sure."

"This was a stupid idea, coming out here tonight. We're not going to get any sleep."

"What's going on tomorrow?" Zack asks. Mike looks at him and shakes his head.

"I don't even want to talk about it," Rick says.

"Well, I'm glad we came back here tonight," Mike says. "It feels like an eternity since we used to go here, man. I think it's cool to see it now that we're older."

"You know," Zack says. "*Stephen Hawking said 'Eternity is a very long time, especially towards the end.'*"

"Stephen Hawking never said that," Mike tells him.

"He totally did," Zack insists.

"No, what Stephen Hawking said was—"

"Stephen Hawking never said anything," Rick tells them flatly. He puts a hand back into his overcoat again hoping to find a black pill or two.

"You know," Zack says. "Hawking could actually talk just fine until his mid-twenties."

"Shut the fuck up, Zack," Rick says. Then something occurs, "Wait, where's Lou?" It's just the three of them again in the hallway. Right about then Lou comes out of the library door. He walks up to the rest leisurely. "What were you doing in there?" Rick asks.

"What? I was stealing a book," Lou holds up a paperback.

"When did you learn how to read?" Rick asks him.

"Late at night when you were jerking off."

They continue to walk down the dark hallway for maybe seven

minutes or so with no one saying anything. Unsurprisingly Zack is the one to break the silence. “You two really like your books, huh?” Neither Rick or Lou answer. “Me too,” Zack continues. “I used to love to read when I was a kid. Still do when I can find the time.” Still no response. Undaunted, Zack keeps going, “Say Rick, what was that book you were ripping up?”

“*Where The Ladder Leads*,” Lou answers for him.

“How’d you know that?” Zack asks.

“I just know him.”

“You were really going to town on that thing,” Zack says.

“Drop it,” Mike tells Zack.

“What? I’m just wondering what the deal was?” Zack says. “You must have seriously hated that book.” Rick keeps on walking quietly. Zack doesn’t seem to notice. “It’s just weird. I thought everybody loved that book when they were kids—”

“You a Twit fan?” Rick asks.

“If I say yes are you going to tear my fucking head off?”

“What’s your favorite part of the book?”

“When I was a kid I really liked that two headed fox that chased the boy up the ladder.”

“It’s not a fox. It’s a red wolf,” Rick corrects.

“Oh, yeah. That’s right. What was it called? It had some weird name?”

“Bonemo.”

“That’s right. That was its name-o. Bonemo, the two-headed red wolf.”

“Yep,” Rick says.

“You like some sort of expert on Twit’s books or something?”

“Dude, shut the fuck up,” Mike says.

“What?” Zack says. “Christ, I’m just kidding. What’s the big deal with this book?”

“No, I’m not an expert,” Rick says. While he says it he catches Lou looking at him from the side of his eye. “And there’s no big deal with this book. I just like books. Speaking of which,” he turns to his brother. “Curiosity compels me, what book did you swipe?”

“A classic,” Lou tells him before he hands over his recently acquired reading. “I mean, I don’t know, I never really read it. But I saw the movie once and it was pretty cool.”

In the dark hall with only the moonlight it takes a second for Rick to make out the cover. Then he reads the title *Fahrenheit 451* and notices the dumb grin painted across Lou’s face. Rick begins to say, “Fucking Lou—” when a loud, *phsst* sound is heard. Suddenly water starts spraying down from the ceiling. Before anybody can say anything, “Freeze.” This time it’s not Lou. This time it’s a cop. This

time Zack isn't the only one who looks nervous. The four of them turn back to see the cop with flashlight and gun drawn.

"Oh shit," is Zack's contribution to the proceedings. Around this time is when all five of the men in the middle school shift focus from their little standoff to the water coming down from the ceiling. Fire alarm. This realization is followed by the discovery of a growing blanket of smoke spreading down the hallway. The smoke grows so thick the cop's figure starts to get swallowed up in it like it's fog from a Hammer Horror movie. Final confirmation of their suspicions is reached with the unmistakable smell that accompanies the smoke. Something burning. Everybody's coughing when fire bursts out of the Library door. This is sufficient incentive for them to stop being worried about getting arrested and to start concerning themselves about being burnt to death. They take off. The cop is closer to the library so he's breathing it in even worse. He tries to yell something at them but he can't really get the words out. Finally he just starts running, as much after them as he is just trying to avoid the spreading fire.

The four of them lose the cop without much effort as they make their way out of the school via the cafeteria. The fire sprinkler system isn't doing much against the actual fire, but it does prove to be a fairly good deterrent in slowing down vandals. Lou slips twice scrambling to get out of the cafeteria. Every time he does it just makes him giggle like falling down tickles. They're heading out the door when another cop appears. He doesn't even yell freeze. He simply grabs Zack by the neck and slams him against a wall. Apparently inspired, or at the very least feeling left out, Lou jumps on top of this cop taking them both, along with Zack, to the ground. The cop, moved by Lou's urgency, lets go of Zack, who immediately runs away from the fracas.

Lou and the cop look to be playing a highly intense and evenly matched version of the popular game Twister when Rick comes back to check on his little brother. Before he even knows what he's doing Rick delivers a mule kick to the cop's gut. Having never struck a police officer before and not sure when again he'll have the opportunity Rick records the moment mentally for his own posterity. The cop lets go of Lou after the kick. As Lou is getting up he's kicking, swearing and spitting all in rapid succession. Rick pulls him off the cop.

"Let's get the fuck outta here," Rick recommends. They're running across the basketball court when they hear the first shot whiz past them. Rick looks back to see the cop he and Lou just fought joined by the first one they met inside the school. Rick also can't help but notice the large claw of smoke behind them rising out of the school. Another shot yelps past and Rick decides to turn back around and focus on running. They hit the fence, jump it, and make it to the street. Zack and Mike are waiting for them next to some adobe house that's

near the school. Mike seems alright and Zack looks like he's going to cry. They cut through an alley and find Rick's car. Everybody piles in soaking wet like they've just been born or baptized.

Rick can't help but smile. It feels good, real good to be soaking wet on a Sunday night after midnight, which makes it Monday morning, hiding from the police with your friends. There's nothing like it. Rick's breathing is heavy but he feels calm. The water running down from his hair making him feel clean and ready for anything. He starts the car and almost immediately has to pull to the right to allow a couple of fire trucks through. Lou's laughing like a coked up hyena and Rick starts laughing too. He's not even mad at him. How could he be? His nights would be a lot less interesting without Lou around to burn things down. Besides, Rick knows this town; he knows the roads. With the fire climbing so high, so fast, the cops and everybody would be too busy trying to stop it to spend too much time trying to find them. So why worry about it? He knows this town. They'll never catch them.

But Rick only gets to appreciate the night's unexpectedly agreeable ending briefly. Scratching around the back of his brain the entire time while Rick drives everyone home is one persistent thought, one singular image: Rick imagines the torn pages back in the library and the flames there that are curling them up. The words Nefarious Twit swallowed up by black and returning to nothingness.

This is important.