
The Dreamcatcher Trilogy · Volume One

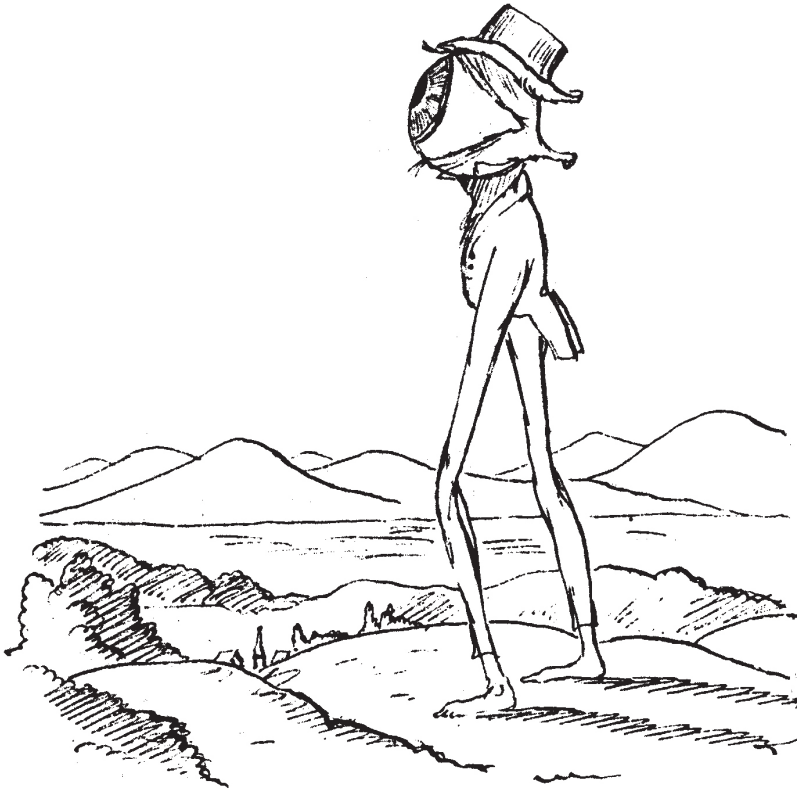
The
Transparent
Eyeball

S H A R O N K A Y E

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Our truest life is when we are in dreams awake.

— Henry David Thoreau



"Transparent Eyeball" by Christopher Pearse Cranch, ca. 1836-1838

C H A P T E R O N E

I'm out of sync. That's the only way to explain it.

It's like I'm listening to one soundtrack, and everybody else is listening to another one. I zig; they zag. I zag; they zig. There's a lot of them and just one of me. That makes it look like I'm wrong—all wrong.

Take my post to the neighborhood social media page the other night. One of my neighbors posted that she “heard a loud, crashing noise coming from the pond.” And so I posted, “I dare everyone to go to sleep tonight.”

I thought it was funny. It was supposed to be a joke. From my point of view, it was—and still is—a joke. Not a threat. A harmless joke.

Anyhow, stuff they think is funny I don't find funny at all. There was the thing in the courtyard at school. I did it because she was laughing at me. I feel like she and her friends are always laughing at me—for no reason. It's like they need something to laugh at, and I'm the one who stands out from the crowd, so they laugh at me. Well, I don't exist to play a role for somebody else.

Her smirk says, “You don't fit in. You'll never fit in. You'll never be good enough to fit in.”

There's only so much a guy can take before he's just going to snap and shove her so hard that it knocks the smirk right off her face. It worked, too. But then I'm the one who gets suspended. *She* should be suspended. She started it.

But that's okay. I'll be the bad guy. I *am* the bad guy. I don't mind. I kind of like it. And I think I could be really good at it...in time.

So I've started planning some things—some bad things. I don't want anyone to get hurt, but there are plenty of people out there who could stand to feel a little scared—who need a good wake-up call telling them that not everyone fits into their neat little world. Some of us don't even want to fit into it.

For what seemed like the longest time, I had to do all my thinking in my head because my mom is always nosing around in my stuff at home. It wouldn't be safe to keep anything there. But then I had a stroke of good luck: I found a place. It's out in the woods past the railroad tracks. Nobody knows about it. I go out there and make my plans. It's the only thing I look forward to.

The place is a little weird—creepy, actually. But that's okay. I like creepy. I *am* creepy.

It's a cabin. A very old one—so old that it looks like it grew there among the trees. It's shaped like a rectangular box with a pointed roof. Its walls are covered in wooden shingles. It has a door at the front, a gridded-glass window on each side, and a chimney at the back. It's pretty weather-battered, and you can see chinks here and there where the

wind probably blows through. But that doesn't matter here in Red River, Louisiana, where it never gets too cold for comfort outside. Too hot, yes, in midsummer. I'll find out in a month or two, but I bet it won't be that bad in the wooded ravine where the cabin is located.

I scouted out the cabin for a few days before going inside because I figured it must belong to someone—some crazy person with a hunting rifle or a bloody hatchet or something. But no one came around. When I dared to creep closer, it seemed pretty clear that the cabin had been abandoned for some time. No muddy footprints. No signs of a campfire. So I opened the front door and looked inside.

It's small—about ten feet by fifteen feet—and pretty empty. There's a bed, a few chairs, a crate of firewood, a small table, and a desk.

“Hello?” I called, knowing there was no one there. There was nowhere for someone to hide. Still, I felt I should announce myself before barging in.

When no one answered, I entered and sat down on the bed. It was really just a cot with a blue-and-white checkered mat and a single, grayish-green wool blanket—the scratchy kind.

Whose hideout is this? I kept thinking to myself, amazed because it was just the sort of hideout I'd have built for myself if I'd had the chance. *Maybe they're done with it, and it can be mine.*

I leaned against the wall behind the cot and took a deep breath—the first really deep, untroubled breath I'd had for a

while, actually. The air was tangy and sweet. I heard some skittering in the tree outside the window where I'd observed a family of squirrels. I also heard the high-pitched squeal of some whistling ducks.

The cabin was clean. Well, the wooden floor was dirty, but in a normal way for a cabin in the woods. What I mean is that there was no garbage—like beer cans and chip bags—strewn around. That's part of what made it so eerie. Because there are always beer cans and chip bags, right? I swear, after humans kill themselves off and aliens come to our planet to check it out, they'll think we *lived* for beer and chips.

So that day in mid-May, when I was lounging on the cot—*my* cot—breathing deep, enjoying furtive animal sounds and moist fragrances floating freely through the open door, that's when I first noticed the picture.

It was tacked on the wall above the desk. The predominant colors in it were dark green and brown, just like the mossy wooden wall behind it, which is why I didn't notice it at first. It was a poster print of a professional painting—an old one. I sat staring across the room at it for a long time.

At the center of the painting was a majestic, old tree. It was so tall that even the lowest branches were beyond the top of the painting. Dazzling sunlight fell on its trunk, highlighting the bark's texture. If you looked closely, that trunk almost became a long, thin face—an ancient face, wise and a little bit sad. In the end, I decided that the painting was mostly about this tree.

But the tree wasn't the only thing. There were actually fourteen men standing or sitting beneath it. They had a small tent and a large lean-to. Like a patch of wild mushrooms, they were wearing an interesting assortment of camping hats.

Most of the men—eleven to be exact—were looking at something beyond the right side of the painting. One of the men was aiming a rifle at it, whatever it was. But he wasn't entirely prepared to shoot.

Was it an animal? A bear? A family of deer? Surely not. These men were not hunting. They were at their camp, puzzled by an interruption, thinking about it—about how to respond to it.

The three who weren't paying attention to the thing seemed to be gutting a fish on a large, flat-topped stump. Whether they were studying the fish or getting ready to cook it wasn't clear.

But the rest were transfixed by the thing, and were none too pleased by it. It was something vexing, unexpected. While they weren't exactly afraid of it, they weren't about to go any closer, either. The man in the middle, closest to the wise, old tree, seemed the most ambivalent. You could almost see him turn toward the fish gutters and then back toward the thing and then back again, swiveling in indecision.

A ghost? An alien? A pack of wolves? None of these possibilities seemed to fit.

I racked my brain until I couldn't stand it anymore. I just had to read the fine print at the bottom of the poster. Surely the title of the painting would yield a clue.



https://concordlibrary.org/special-collections/emerson-celebration/Em_Con_80

The painting was called *The Philosophers' Camp*, by William James Stillman.

Leaning against the little desk as I squinted to read the title of the painting, I bumped the handle of a small drawer in it—the only inch of the cabin I had not yet examined. I opened it. Inside was a note written in blue ink on an open notebook that was crispy new and otherwise blank. The note read:

*Who are these men,
and what are they looking at?*

CHAPTER TWO

I hustled on out of the cabin after seeing that note. It was just so fresh and deliberate. Obviously someone was still using the desk. I suddenly felt like a fish in a fishbowl—like someone might be scoping *me* out.

Whose land was the cabin on, anyhow? The railroad? The national park? Private property? It wasn't clear from what I could see on the internet.

Dang! I really needed that cabin now. I had already begun putting my plan into action. My plan? Oh yes, my plan.

Well, Memorial Day is coming up, you know, at the end of May. It's a day off from school and from work. Other than that, most people don't bother celebrating. But then there's Mr. Smith.

Daniel Duncan Smith III is what my mom calls a “real doozy.” He must weigh about 300 pounds. Most of the time he drives around in one of those fancy wheelchairs, even though he can walk fine when he wants to. He lives alone in an old house on the bayou at the far edge of our neighborhood. My mom says there's no way his property is included in our neighborhood association, but it must be

because he has the key—the only key—to the boathouse on our neighborhood pond.

The boathouse on the pond has been a major source of contention ever since I can remember. Every few years it flairs up, and there's a big fight, with people taking sides and arguing up and down the neighborhood social media page. Then people get sick of it and forget about it until the next time.

The issue is that the boathouse is a hideous and useless piece of crap that needs to be torn down, but it can't be torn down because it's legally protected as some kind of "historic building." A couple of years ago when the Ramackers moved into our neighborhood, Mr. Ramacker offered to build a fishing shack with a pier in its place, which would have been awesome. *But nooo.*

The boathouse is so bad that it can't even be used as a hideout. Believe me—I've tried. Even if it wasn't locked with inaccessible windows, the floor is cracked and rotten. It's a miracle that it doesn't simply topple into the water. We all keep hoping it will, but it never does.

Mr. Smith's granddaddy was an army chaplain in the Civil War. Each Memorial Day, Mr. Smith gets a crapload of fireworks and sets them off from the roof of that old boathouse to commemorate Daniel Duncan Smith I. The crazy thing is that if Daniel Duncan Smith I was a soldier from the Deep South in the Civil War, then he would have been a *Confederate* soldier fighting to *keep* slavery. But Memorial Day was established to celebrate the victory of

the Union North, which fought to *end* slavery. So the whole thing is totally messed up. Mr. Smith refuses to talk about it. Not the most talkative guy to begin with, he's especially *untalkative* about Memorial Day.

But the fireworks are always pretty cool. Most of the neighborhood comes out to watch—whether they are ultimately for Mr. Smith or against him. He gets drunk and gets up on that roof and yells his rebel yells and shoots off his fiery rockets. The local law enforcement just looks the other way.

So anyhow, here's my great idea: I'm going to blow the thing up. I'm going to blow that boathouse to smithereens. It's going to be easy because I'm going to do it in true Civil War style, with nothing but black powder.

Black powder was the only known chemical explosive up until the mid- to late nineteenth century. They used it in guns and canons and for blasting tunnels in solid rock. They still use it in fireworks. It's what gives fireworks that distinctive, acrid smell.

Black powder is not as powerful as dynamite, but the beauty of it is that you can make it yourself at home. The only problem is that I'll need a lot of it—I figure about ten pounds. According to my research, ten one-pound containers, strategically placed under the wooden floors of the boathouse, remotely ignited at the same time, should be devastating. That's what I'm aiming for: devastation. Devastation with an audience! It will knock them right off their high horses.

It's not really that dangerous, if you do it right. I mean, you don't want to ingest any of the ingredients or get them in your eyes, so I got safety glasses, a dust mask, and gloves. And you need a ventilated place to work, hence the cabin. *My cabin. Well, the cabin I thought was mine.*

I might have abandoned the whole project after finding the notebook if I hadn't gotten ahead of myself. But I did—I'll admit it. I'd bought the supplies before I found that stupid notebook. *Ugh!*

I was just so sure that the cabin was abandoned. I wanted it to be—needed it to be. I'd ordered all the stuff online and used the boathouse address for delivery so my mom wouldn't see any of it. As the boxes started to arrive, I just swung past the boathouse and put them in a big plastic tub under the porch. No one would ever notice. Even if they did, they would just think it was Mr. Smith's fireworks.

Now here I sit with all the ingredients for a catastrophe and no place to mix them.

I was thinking that thought as I rounded the boathouse, having put the final box in its hiding place. That's when I ran into Ivy.