

Hey, Reader:

Thanks for downloading the Prologue of *Cadaver Blues*.

I'd also thank J.E. Fishman for creating me, but since then it's been nothing but aggravation. People drop into my office with the prospect of helping pay bills, and before I know it I'm in trouble up to my chin. The gift of life, it seems, just keeps on taking.

Speaking of taking, I understand you got this excerpt for free, which is just my luck. The serialization of *Cadaver Blues* was free, too, but at least they had the good sense to make it a pain in the ass to read—dribs and drabs on the big computer screen. No worries. You're finally a step closer to consuming it the right way.

If you did start reading on The Nervous Breakdown website, where I was invented and serialized, you'll find this Prologue completely new. Either way, it's just a taste of the first book of what will be a long and entertaining series. Next up is *Ruby Red Dead*, but I'm not here to talk about the heartburn that one's causing me.

Remember: Fictional characters never die. Their stories just get more dangerous.

Please send money,

Phu Goldberg

Prologue

When I think of dead people my mind drifts to junior high school, which is no coincidence. I kept a journal back then. It ended on a Tuesday in 1987, broken off in mid-sentence when the study hall monitor rested a hand on my back and said, “Goldberg, you’re dismissed. You’re needed at home.”

I was fourteen years old. I went to the principal’s office and her secretary breached protocol and gave me a lift.

“Your father’s gone off,” my mother said as she opened the front door.

I thought: *Gone off?* It was the same phrase she used for old cartons of milk.

“He never made it to work. They located his car by the train station.”

We drove to the station and searched his Buick Riviera, finding no clue. The day was beautiful, May breezes and birds chirping. It was a helluva day to be alive unless your father had “gone off” and you were the class math nerd, a boy who weighed less than most girls in the eighth-grade and had started keeping a diary at the suggestion of a therapist to deal with your anger issues.

Back home, my mother hammered the phone, calling Dad’s friends and co-workers, getting nowhere. *Great.* We had four and a half weeks left of school and my father had flaked out. My first name, Phuoc, already made me a daily target of knuckle-draggers. Now all I could think was *Please, God, don’t let anyone get wind of this episode before the term completes. Don’t make me the butt of jokes all summer.*

There were no percentages in that wish. My mother’s panic filled the kitchen like seeping gas, and I felt compelled to remove myself. I shouldered my backpack and told Mom that I’d cruise the streets, see if I could find Dad. She agreed readily, eager for any help at all.

We lived in a split-level ranch, one among hundreds in an undistinguished development. I bounded along the sidewalk and turned down a strip of lawn between our house and the neighbor’s. There was a wooded park behind, and the spring trees looked as soft as a watercolor painting. The gate in our backyard fence stood open. I decided to cut through.

A well-defined path crossed the woods, worn flat and weedless by aimless teenagers like me. Two hundred feet down that path something deep in the trees to my right caught my eye. It looked like a yellow sack, and I immediately thought of those outdoor guys like Jack London who spoke of hanging their food from trees to keep the bears away. But we had no bears on Long Island.

I left the path and approached the sack cautiously. Splashes of sun illuminated random spots in the woods, making the shadows seem deeper, masking the sack’s details. So it took me a minute to appreciate that the sack was bigger than I’d thought at first, two-tone—no, three—a dark brown top, yellow middle and a longer tan bottom, slightly darker than the dried beech leaves that clung desperately to dead branches nearby.

When I was thirty feet away, a bad feeling overtook me. It caused me to stop in my tracks at first, then to break into a jog. The dark brown, I realized, was my father’s hair. The yellow his shirt. The tan his slacks, which were wet at the crotch. I ran to him and grabbed him around the shins and struggled in vain to hoist him up, choking on the smell of his feces. I am short and he hung high, having chosen a tree to which some kids had nailed wooden rungs for a makeshift lookout. The soles of his shoes soiled my plaid shirt, rubbing back and forth when I worked to

improve my grip.

Dad's was the first dead body I'd ever set eyes upon or touched. He had more heft in death than he'd had in life, and even when the breeze stirred that day he was as inert as a toadstool on the forest floor.

As hope drained from me I looked straight up past the white electrical cord that cinched his neck. One of his swollen hands, flopping around, partly obstructed the view, but I saw what I could, and that was enough.

His face was frozen blue, and his eyes had turned to clay. But what struck me more than anything was the color of his skin. I thought I'd never see that blue again as long as I lived.

The gods, as it turns out, had other ideas.