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## Wake Up Call

For Ulysses S. Grant it had been a long, bumpy, and harrowing trail from Fort Humboldt, California to Galena, Illinois. The threat of Indian attack, as they passed through Indian territory, and a sudden storm on the trail that almost wiped out their wagon train, were expected by a soldier, who had served as a lieutenant in the Mexican war and fought Comanches in Texas before his post at the fort. He was, after all, a hard-bitten soldier who was used to danger and discomfort. With the exception of his wife and children, who had followed him throughout much of his career, he preferred military folks to civilians. After leaving the Army, in fact, he could never fit into civilian life. Without a vocation, he struggled through seven unsuccessful years trying to hold down a job. His father offered him a position in Galena, Illinois, in a branch of his tannery business, but he declined the offer. He had never got along with the family patriarch and, for that matter, his two younger brothers, who shared the business. Instead he attempted farming in his brother-in-law's property near Saint Louis, Illinois, using slaves owned by Julia's father. Two years of a half-hearted attempt, his aversion to slavery, farming, and being under his father-in-law's thumb made him dislike this endeavor too.

Having met with no more success farming than he did in the tannery business, Grant, with his wife and five children, left the farm to work as a bill collector with his wife's cousin in Saint Louis. Soon, it was apparent to him, that this job was also unsuitable. Working with debtors, some of who were losing their farms or homes to the bank seemed dishonorable to him. As he told his wife after quitting, at least Mexicans and Indians could shoot back when attacked. Times were hard before the Civil War. Folks, like himself, got along as best as they could. By now, however, Grant was in financial straights. In 1860, while America was embroiled in factionalism between the North and South, he was forced to return to the family business and accept his old job in Grant and Perkins Leather Shop, to sell harnesses, saddles, and other leather goods. In addition to selling, he was also a buyer, purchasing hides from farmers near Galena. After accepting his old job back and moving to Galena with his family, he found himself at a low point in his checkered life.

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The thought of returning to his father's leather goods store, after so many exciting years in the Army, and then failing as a farmer and bill collector, had filled him with depression and dread. The very reason he had taken such undesirable jobs had been to avoid the tannery business; and here he was back in the store. Because of his promise to his wife, who had suffered long years with his military pay, and after repeated job-failures, he had been duty-bound to rejoin the family business. He and his wife now had a small house, garden, and modest coach. A regular paycheck and bank account, which exceeded the level of his Army earnings and savings and the hectic and occasional dangers of military service weighed against the peaceful life of a married man, should have left him satisfied with his life, and yet he was frightfully bored with his day-to-day living, especially this humdrum job. Gradually, during after-dinner brandies, stops at the local tavern, and a large jug of whiskey purchased on the sly, his old habits returned.

One day, after several weeks of lackluster performance as a seller and buyer of leather goods, it became apparent to his father and brothers that he was not cut out for the business. In

fact, Grant, it seemed to his father, wasn't cut out for much of any kind of work. He continued to drink on and off the job. Farmers selling hides complained that he smelled of whiskey, and on one fateful day, he drank himself into a stupor.

While his father and his brothers were out drumming up business, he had been left in charge of the store. Similar to a soldier, he would reflect later, he had been asleep at his post. In wartime, he could have been shot. Had he been caught by his father or one of his brothers, he might have been fired. That day, however, he would also recall, the Good Lord had been watching over him. Into his dreamscape, which included patches from his checkered past, he could hear what sounded like a bell ringing. Since the current phase of his dream had brought him face to face with his father once more, the tinkling sound made no sense at all.

"Ulysses," cried the ghostly specter, "you lazy, shiftless, drunk!"

The bell ringing over the door was followed by footsteps clapping over the wooden floor, but to the sleeper it sounded much like distant thunder. The silhouette of a tall, portly woman against the afternoon sun appeared, unseen by the rest of the world, in the doorway. To this patron of the leather goods store it appeared as if no one was about. Misses Amy Rose Schultz now called out in a lilting but nasally voice "Simpson, Orvil, Jesse, who's minding the store?" His name hadn't been called out. This was the first time he had been left alone in the store. When there was no reply, she walked over to the counter and hammered the bell alongside of the cash register. Again the bell sounded in his dream but this time much louder.

"I could be a thief and empty your cash box for all you care," she called into the back room. "Hurry it up. I don't have all day!"

"What's wrong with you people?" the ghostly specter cried out in his dream.

The woman repeated a previous question, "Who's minding the store?" and then beat on the bell unmercifully.

Because the voice of his father had changed to a woman's lilting voice, this addition to his dream, as the incessant bell, made no sense at all to him. At this point, Amy took the liberty of searching the interior of the store, puffing and cursing under her breath, until in one corner, nestled beside a saddle, the sleeper stirred. Awakening finally to the woman's prodding finger, he looked up, through blurry eyes, to a more dreadful specter than even the cantankerous face of his father in his dream.

"Are you drunk, mister?" she asked tactlessly.

The fact that he was, in fact, quite tipsy, was evident. In spite of his predicament, he moved sluggishly, his eyes drooping, hair mussed, and a drool escaping his lip. This time, even in his state of mind, he knew he had gone too far. The fact was, of course, he had only recently taken the temperance oath demanded by his wife and brothers. Now look at me, he thought, giggling foolishly.

"I'm sober as a stone," he muttered belatedly, staggering to his feet, "who in thunderation are *you*?"

"Question is, who in tarnation are *you*?" The woman snarled. "Where's mister Grant? Where's his sons?"

"I'm the older brother," he said, looking around sheepishly at the store beyond. "... Ulysses. Everyone calls me Sam."

"Ulysses," she snorted, as if unfamiliar with the name, "sounds Greek. Well, I'm Amy Rose Schultz. Your brother Simpson was supposed to repair my saddle harness." "By the way," she scowled, "where *is* he? Where are Jesse and Orvil too?"

“I dunno,” Ulysses scratched his wooly head, “drumming up business, I suppose. Farmers are always selling hides.”

At that moment, he took stock of himself. As Amy stood appraising him, Ulysses, having gathered his wits, scurried into the back room to search for the repaired harness. When he found the harness hanging on one of the cluttered walls, he noticed on the scrap of paper with the name Schultz scrawled on it the words ‘Post Office wagon harness’ beneath.

“You the postmaster for Galena now?” he called back.

“Nah, my husband Hank is,” she sighed. “He’s down sick with the shingles. I been called to duty.” “Oh, I almost forgot,” she mumbled, as he returned with the harness. “I got some letters for the shop here.... One came by special courier for a U. S. Grant.”

“That’s me,” he frowned. “Let’s have a look.”

“How much for the harness?” She asked, reaching into a large checkered bag.

Recognizing the stamp on his letter, he gasped and sat back down on his stool. The audacity of the woman was forgotten in a rush of emotion Ulysses had not felt for many months.

“It’s from Governor of the state.” He looked up at her. “What in the blazes would he be sending me official correspondence for?”

“You haven’t heard?” She looked down at him.

“Heard? Oh you mean all that secessionist nonsense in the paper?” He nodded, as he studied the ominous envelope for a moment.

“That was yesterday’s news, Mister Grant,” she shook her head in wonder. “Haven’t you read this morning’s Herald?”

“No,” he admitted, ripping open the letter, “I haven’t had a chance to fetch one yet. What’s it say?”

As the woman reached into her large bag and, with an element of drama, pulled out the morning news, Ulysses had read the opening lines to his letter.

*Dear Mister Grant:*

*In recognition of your past service to the country, I am requesting your assistance in forming a militia to protect our state from possible secessionist violence and, in the event that war becomes eminent, help train our men for service to the Union cause...*

The remainder of the letter grew increasingly irrelevant as Ulysses glanced up at the headlines of the morning news

“I don’t believe it.” He swallowed heavily. “Those damn fools!”

“Yup!” Amy grinned down at him. “They went and did it.”

Suddenly, after years of aimless wandering from job to job after his one-time service to his country during the Mexican War and distant duty in California, he saw this dreadful event as his salvation. His civilian days were over. Ulysses S. Grant would do what he did best: serve his country. After collecting the money for the saddle from Amy Rose Schultz and thanking her profusely for her letter, he made himself a pot of coffee, swore off whiskey once more, and sat staring at the headlines of today’s paper: Secessionists Fire Upon Fort Sumter!

“Good Lord.” He shook his head. “We’re at war!”

The Civil War had begun.

## The Little Corporal

The sounds of battle and scenes of death were muted and shut out momentarily as he entered the bunker's chamber and confronted Major Heinrich Rolf. Unlike the ordinary soldiers and noncoms sitting in the open trenches, the officers of the Second Reich had cozy dugouts burrowed deeply into the ground, making their headquarters nearly bombproof and watertight. Even so, the courier thought as he handed the major his dispatch, the chamber, which had only a ladder to climb down and no other air vents but the opening on top, was dreary, stifling and filled with bad air. He gave the major a belated salute and mumbled his name. Two young lieutenants sat at the table with Major Rolf, casting the courier haunted, despairing looks as he stood their waiting for the major to respond. Rolf, despite the battering his regiment was taking, seemed utterly exhausted and beyond caring about the affairs of the war. Wondering if the major had simply not heard his name, the courier, snapped to attention smartly, gave his best salute this time and announced in a loud voice: "Corporal Adolf Hitler, First Battalion of the Bavarian Regiment!"

"You don't have to shout corporal," snorted Major Rolf, motioning for the courier to sit down.

As the major sat there staring at the unread dispatch, a mug of coffee clutched in his trembling hand, Corporal Hitler, his uniform and boots caked with mud, remained at attention. A lock of sweat-drenched chestnut hair was plastered on his forehead. Two piercing blue eyes blinked with confusion through his grimy, haggard face. The Chaplinesque moustache over his lip, the only part of his face not covered with grime, quivered as he looked, with silent disapproval, down at the other men. In the distance, beyond the walls of the dugout, came the familiar racket of machine gun fire and occasional cannon fire indicating that German or Allied troops were on the move. When Rolf looked up from the dispatch, he seemed to study the corporal. A snarl played on his bristly face, as if he did not seem to like what he saw.

"Hitler, did you say? I knew a Hitler," he muttered to himself, "but that's an Austrian name, isn't it? You're awfully dark for a German and much too short. Why would an Austrian be mixed up in that Bavarian bunch?"

"Austrian the name, German the heart," chirped Adolf, unshaken by his disdain.

"How glib, how very glib," sneered Rolf. "Did I not tell you to sit down?"

Uncomfortable with this lack of military decorum, Adolf sat down on the chair across from the major after one of the two young lieutenants relinquished his chair. The young lieutenant walked dejectedly across the room and fell heavily into his bunk.

"Do you have any idea what your regiment is asking me to do?" Rolf growled miserably, as he scanned the dispatch.

"No, I don't sir," Adolf replied stiffly, looking off into space.

"Look at me!" Rolf slammed his mug down, the coffee spilling all over the dispatch. "What is the matter with you Corporal Hitler? Are you addled? Certainly you have an opinion about this damn war!"

"Sir, I think this is a glorious war," Adolf confessed shakily but with great passion. "I'm honored to serve the Fatherland. Germany has a great destiny to fulfill!"

"Glorious war?... Honored to serve the Fatherland?... *What drivel!*" spat Rolf, looking around at his lieutenants. "Is this dirty little corporal stupid or just plain mad?"

The lieutenant still sitting at the table gave him a deadpan look. The lieutenant suffering from battle fatigue lie in his bunk, staring up at the bottom of the bunk above.

“Listen Herr Hitler,” Rolf reached over and tapped Adolf’s helmet. “Haven’t you heard? We’re losing this war!”

“Sir, I’ve heard no such thing!” Adolf was becoming irritated with Major Rolf.

“Yes, it’s true,” Rolf nodded, “and let me tell you why.”

Whether Corporal Hitler liked it or not, he was given a lecture by Rolf on where Germany had gone wrong, which included a concise outline of the evils of trench warfare as well as the causes of this unfortunate war.

According to Major Rolf, General Moltke was a moron for entrenching his army so close to the Marne. The commanding general had placed his troops in a hopeless situation. Corporal Hitler found the major’s disrespect for a superior officer disconcerting. By now, however, he was not surprised with the attitude he found in the bunker. He would never learn the details of the dispatch, and, at this point, he didn’t care. With his satchel slung over his arm with Rolf’s crude response crammed inside, Corporal Hitler saluted the major and mumbled something only he could hear: “Goodbye and good riddance!” He felt only contempt for the major and his weak-kneed lieutenants, but he would not dare report the treasonous talk he had heard this hour. There was enough defeatism on the Western Front without adding to it now.

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On the way back to headquarters, to avoid running the gauntlet of fire, Hitler made a fateful decision. Using the German trench as cover until it ended at the forest’s Edge, he slipped over the wall, skirted the Marne River, and then crept into the nearby woods. The trail he had used earlier through a farmer’s field was too dangerous. With his satchel now empty and his spirits low, he had but one concern: survive this day. As a courier constantly in the line of fire, his life could be ended any moment. He really wasn’t surprised with Major Rolf’s attitude. In his own headquarters he had seen similar despair. Rolf was typical of many officers joining the war effort—men who left their jobs as bankers, lawyers, and businessmen to serve the Fatherland. When the sheen of glory faded, they gave up, wishing to return to their civilian lives. The true professionals such as Moltke were seasoned veterans and life long soldiers, who had no misconceptions about war. Instead of belaboring a few defeats, they looked ahead to the final victory; there could be no room for doubt. Like Rolf and the other defeatists, though, he wasn’t sure of the outcome, himself. Just this morning, as he entered Major Rolf’s bunker, his spirits had been high. A few words from that beaten down fellow and his confidence had plunged. This hour, after hearing such defeatism again and this time from a front line officer, the cold fingers of doubt crept into his mind. If the current battle was lost, what would be the outcome of this war? In a split second a snipers bullet could end his life, and he would never know. His belief in the Second Reich and Kaiser Wilhelm had been his strength. This had kept him going. Had he been in denial all this time? Had his optimism been based on blind faith, not logic or reason. Germany was fighting two fronts now against four countries: England, France, Russia, and the United States. Miraculously, against overwhelming odds, they were winning in the East against the Bolsheviks, but here on their Western front in their own backyard, if the rumors were true, they were losing.... How was this possible after such a glorious start? Adolf asked himself, as negotiated the path. Such victorious beginning was being marred by poor leadership—the Rolfs in the army but also by the spirit of men. Men who wanted to be home

with their wives, family, parents, and jobs. Men who had given up hope in Germany's future... Men like Major Rolf!

He was exhausted and ready to drop, but if he lie down on the ground this moment he would sleep for hours. It was all he could do to move his feet—the thought of the warm interior of headquarters egging him on. Suddenly, he heard voices ahead. To his horror he realized he was no longer in the woods. He was out in the open. Directly ahead was a bridge, much smaller than the one he crossed near the farmer's field. Normally, at this leg of journey, he would make a dash across the planks to reach the forest on the other side, but he had stumbled through the woods like blind man this time. Somewhere back on the trail, he lost his concentration. He had been careless. Fatigue had dulled his senses. It was as if he had been sleepwalking. Now, after as if waking up from a nap, he had stumbled into a nightmare. Down a ways, on the other side of the stream, men were busily smashing planks to make the bridge impassable. The rushing water would make it difficult to cross. Unlike the river in back of him, it was but a small tributary, easily sabotaged. Dynamite was out of the question this close to the enemy lines. For such a small enterprise, they risked exposure, capture or death. These were bold fellows to be so close to German lines. Busy with their work, they hadn't spotted him yet. So far, the thought raced through his head, his luck held. Frozen momentarily on the path, he looked around, looking for an avenue of escape. If he ran back toward the woods, one of them might look up and shoot him dead or chase him down, and bayonet him to death. All he could think of doing was duck into the bush on the embankment and wait it out. Hopefully, after they finished their task, they would just leave, leaving him stranded on the other side. Unless he found another bridge, he would have to forge the stream. At that moment, the thought carried from Major's Rolf's bunker consumed him: All that mattered was to stay alive.

During his ordeal, he felt like a fugitive. How long would he have to wait? What if they strolled down the stream's edge and saw him hiding in the brush? As he hunkered down, using his satchel as pillow against the brambles, the throes of sleep reached out to him. Blinking fiercely, he sat up, rubbed mud into his eyes, silently cursed his fate, and tried to pray. His catholic upbringing in Bavaria couldn't help him nor the pious words of his mother that sounded like rubbish to him now. Hitler's God was providence. His faith was in his own blind luck. Hearing a snap of twigs, that moment, he heard words he couldn't understand. Rising up, with his hands in the air, it seemed his luck had run out.

The British soldier was saying in a low voice, "Eh, you're a sorry sight. You been hiding in there long? Ho-ho, you look like one of me grandmother's hogs." "Here," he snorted, pointing at his holster, "give me that pistol." "Now let me see that satchel," he growled, snatching it from his hands. "Empty. Lucky for you it is. What was it, eh? You blokes planning on breaking out." "What does it matter," he scoffed tossing it back. "We got you blokes surrounded. We're gonna hand your Kaiser on the nearest tree."

Hitler had no knowledge of English. Knowing full well he wouldn't understand him either, he replied in German, "Go ahead shoot me. I don't care. You fools are behind enemy line—all for one puny bridge!"

Belying his words was the fearful certainty that he had of his future. Not believing this could have anything but a disastrous outcome, he lapsed into silence as the man turned and walked away. Surely, he would call his comrades, thought Hitler. He wouldn't just let him go. This, however, is how it appeared, as he departed. It was too good to believe. The sound of his footsteps crushing the gravel were deafening to Hitler's ears. Any moment, he expected him

to report him to his comrades. They were, after all, the enemy and behind their lines. *Why would he let him go?*

“Get back in your hole,” the man called back irritably, “I killed me enough Germans today!”

Recognizing, in the wave of his hand, the signal of dismal, Hitler sighed deeply. Settling back into his nest, he waited for nearly an hour. Looking at his father’s watch, he counted the minutes. What just happened would strengthen his resolve. Right now he was just glad to be alive. Not believing in God or religion, in general, he believed in a shadowy providence. For him, every man had a destiny. For many, it would mean working and making money, raising a family, or becoming a criminal or parasite in society. Some, like himself, were luckier than others, for they had a purpose in the world. Luck had carried the corporal through the war so far. As quickly as it seemed his luck had ran out, it had returned. This time it saved his life.

While most men alter history by good or evil deeds, the British soldier changed its course not by what he did but by what he didn’t do. He didn’t put a bullet in the enemy soldier, stab him with his bayonet, or march him off as a prisoner back to his lines. He let him go, as if it was but a trifling event: the greatest monster in human history. Because of his charitable act, fifty million people would die. The entire world would be torn for six years by a devastating war.

For Corporal Adolf Hitler, of course, it was a fortuitous event—more of his good luck, and yet it was so much more. He regretted being tongue-tied and not properly thanking the man. Had the situation been reversed and he caught him hiding in a bush, he might have shot him dead. He had cheated death. Too weary to ponder heavily on his good fortune, he continued down the trail, unaware of its significance, and yet recording it later in his diary and one day toting it to his minions as proof that providence was on his side. The long, destructive path of his future remained unrealized in his soldier’s mind, and yet he was certain, because of those moments by the stream, he had a role in this world. The stream of history was with him. Germany would win, he told himself. He would live.... Someday he would make his mark on the world!

## The Crossing

From a distance, the small band of hunters seemed insignificant. To Cloud Mover's tired eyes, they formed a thin arc, moving imperceptibly toward the herd. Their fur clad and hooded bodies, with the antlers still attached, had deceived the caribou in the past. The great effort in skinning the animals and leaving the face and antlers intact had been left to the women of the band. They would skin the game, cook it, and prepare the hides. Then they would sit in the background, with the others, as the hunters feasted on their kills, waiting for leftovers to be thrown their way. Life was brutal on the taiga. He had been the patriarch, and the families had been under his leadership for many years. Now, the time drew near when he would be too old to follow the band. Like all old people, he would be abandoned to his fate. For him, the ancient charade was a haunting reminder that he once wore the antlers on his head but now must stand watch as the younger men played the game.

Each time that they donned their hoods and grabbed their spears, a ritual would begin, in which the wives, sisters, little brothers, and old ones, like himself, would stand in a circle around the hunters, dancing and singing as the hunters waved their barbed spears. As he looked down from the cliff, the ancient charade performed by his people filled him with nostalgia. And yet he was satisfied with the way things were. He had his time as a leader and hunter in the band. Now it was their turn. Soon a younger hunter would take his place, and, after being left behind as the band moved on, he would join his ancestors, whose spirits also followed the herds.

He could see Running Calf and Fire-In-The-Bush, his sons, among the arc of men. On the periphery, still strong enough to keep up, he could also see his younger brother Three Stags slowly beginning the circle they would try to make around the unsuspecting caribous. It would not be long before Three Stags, his younger brother, would also be too feeble to join in. The old ones were passing away to make room for the young.

The tactic of the hunters was an old trick used by bison and deer hunters throughout the Siberian taiga. A segment of the herd, as it spread out over the ground, would be singled out. As soon as the masquerading hunters had singled out enough games and completed their circle, they would begin slaughtering the caribou trapped inside. This time, however, the watchman could see the dreaded outline of a wolf pack in the horizon. Hidden on the other side of the great herd and with the wind blowing at their back, they were unaware of the hunters. They would, within the next few minutes, attack the weakest members on the far periphery, causing a stampede upon the unsuspecting men. Many good hunters had been gored and trampled in this way, turning a would-be success into a frightening rout.

Realizing the difficult situation they were in, Cloud Mover stood up and waved cautiously to Three Stags. They would not see the wolves on the other side. Only he, high on his cliff, could see this threat. They would, as a consequence of his signal, lose this important opportunity to attack the herd. It would be much more difficult to sneak up on them the next time if they were scattered by wolves, which was going to happen regardless of whether he signaled or not. Confident that he was doing the right thing, however, he waved at Three Stags again and this time signaled with his hands, "Wolves are attacking the herd!" But at such a distance sign language, which in this case was the forefinger and small finger raised straight up, was useless. Carefully, to avoid spooking the herd, he threw pebbles at their feet, until finally one of his sons looked up.

"What is father trying to do?" Running Calf whispered in disbelief.

"He is warning us of course!" Fire-In-The-Bush frowned. "The question is why?"

"Let us disband quickly!" Five Eagles was the first to back away.

Suddenly, to Cloud Mover's dismay, the band bolted for the meadow nearby instead of moving from the scene slowly and cautiously as they should. At that very moment, the watchman witnessed a terrible scene, in which the wolves attacked the western edge of the herd, as he feared, only to drive them upon the hunters as they ran east.

"Your crazy old father has spooked the herd!" Five Eagles cried, as he fell near the onrush of hooves.

Fortunately for Five Eagles, a second wave of wolves were coming the other way, driving the caribou back. It was a great mystery to the others as to why they didn't attack him. He had been left by himself, as they scrambled up the hill. Several of the hungry beasts charged toward him, presenting an even more terrifying scene to his stunned mind, until he seemed to be surrounded by wolves. But then Cloud Mover, their onetime leader, raised his weak eyes up to the sky and prayed as he had never before prayed in his life.

"Oh please, don't let Five Eagles die! Let them eat me; I am old, and he is young. Please Wind Spirit, don't let him die!"

At this point as the first group of wolves brought down a great stag, the remaining members of this large pack began to circle Five Eagles as he jabbed at them with his spear.

"Don't throw your spear!" Running Calf shouted to Five Eagles. "Jab at them. One dead wolf means nothing. Keep poking at them. Don't try to run!"

Fire-In-The-Bush and Three Stags followed his advice, jabbing the barbed tips wildly at the beasts approaching them. The remaining caribou hunters stood a safe distance away with their spears raised, ready to hurl them into the pack. Five Eagles, who was much closer to the pack, seemed doomed. In a panic, as he gripped his spear, he reached down grabbed a nearby rock and flung it at the wolves. Although it came down directly into their midst, it missed them entirely. Momentarily scattered, which had been his intention, they quickly regrouped as he tried backing away. As they circled the hapless hunter, Five Eagles began poking and jabbing every which-way until the wolves halted in their tracks.

"Go away, Yellow Fang!" he shouted, looking askance up the hill. "Fire-In-The-Bush and Three Stags hold fast—back-to-back, but the rest of you men on the hill—Running Calf, Bear Claw, Spotted Hawk, Little Wolf have no excuse. Don't just stand there; throw your spears at the pack. Throw rocks—anything to scatter the wolves. Don't fail me now. I will come back from the Land of the Dead and haunt you all your life!"

Bear Claw's, Spotted Hawk's, and Little Wolf's spears now rained down on the pack, but glanced off their woolly hides, falling uselessly into the snow. Now three of the hunters were weaponless. As Five Eagle kept most of the attention of the beasts, Fire-In-The-Bush and Three Stags backed away up the hill. Once again only temporarily scattered, the wolves quickly regrouped as Five Eagles turned to flee. A few of them ran on ahead as if to bring down Fire-In-The-Bush and Three Stags. Throwing rocks he could dig out of the snow at the pack below, Cloud Mover managed to delay the attack, while Fire-In-The-Bush and Three Stags managed to join the others on the hill. Knowing how foolish it was for the other hunters to hurl their spears at the pack, they followed Running Calf's example and held onto their weapons. Five Eagle's situation appeared to be hopeless. Knowing how futile his attempt at escape would be, he continued to poke and stab at the wolves, until they just stood there staring at him, growling and

bearing their teeth, inching ever closer for the kill.... It appeared to be only a matter of time. The end seemed near.

"Wind Spirit!" the watchman whispered again. "Turn the yellow fangs away. Push them with your unseen hands. Kick them with your unseen feet. Don't let Five Eagles die!"

"What is your father doing now?" Three Stags turned to Fire-In-The-Bush.

"Praying." The other man shook his head. "Lately, that is all he does. As if the Four Winds ever listen!" "Sometimes," he searched for the words, "... I think we are alone!"

"Five Eagles isn't alone." Three Stags said grimly. "Those yellow fangs will wait as long as it takes. As long as Five Eagles keeps jabbing his spear, they will hold back...but not for long!"

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Suddenly, right after Five Eagles had slipped on a pile of caribou droppings and was lying helplessly on the ground, something incomprehensible happened. The darkening mantle of clouds, which hung over the taiga, burst forth with rain. Even though the droplets by themselves would not sway a hungry yellow fang, the sudden shafts of lightning striking the nearby ground sent the entire pack as well as the hunters running for cover. While they retreated, however, the watchman held fast, looking with rapt attention at the deluge pouring from the sky.

As the hunters ran back to camp, Cloud Mover—the onetime caribou hunter leader—straggled far behind. In spite of the redemptive power of the storm, which had saved them from the wolves, the younger men paid him only a begrudging respect. None of them even looked back or waited for him to catch up. Because of their failure to kill caribous, they would be trapped in their mammoth hide huts and forced to wait until the weather cleared and they were able to once again to track the herds. Cloud Mover's wives, children, and grandchildren were happy just to have him back safe and sound. When they were able to reflect on what happened, most of the hunters were thankful for the storm, but not all of them were convinced of the patriarch's alleged miracle. Though thankful that it had rained, and lightning had chased the wolves away, the men were divided on whether it was caused by Cloud Mover's prayer or due to mere luck. Among his advocates, who saw it as a miracle, were most of the hunters and among his detractors was Five Eagles, whose life had been directly saved by the lightning but believed that Cloud Mover had brought the hunters bad luck.

For reasons no one understood, there was bad blood between the old man and young man. After seeing Cloud Mover pray and watch the lightning scatter the wolves, however, many members of the band believed Cloud Mover had great magic. Though there were no official shamans in their culture, men, such as Cloud Mover, could be touched by the Wind Spirit and perform magic to help family and friends.

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As they sat around the fire recounting today's abortive hunt, Fire-In-The-Bush rose dramatically and pointed to Cloud Mover. "You have the Wind Spirit's ear. He listened to you. You are old Cloud Mover, but you have great power. Hawk Nose, who had the gift, is dead. I think you should take his place."

"I don't agree." Five Eagles jumped up angrily. "Cloud Mover brought us bad luck. He spooked the herd. His magic had nothing to do with fire from the sky. Wind Spirit wouldn't listen to that old man!"

Running Calf flew into a rage at Five Eagle's insult against his father, but knowing Five Eagle's prowess with a knife, both his father and brother Fire-In-The-Bush restrained him.

"No, Running Calf," Fire-In-The-Bush whispered in his ear, "don't challenge that fool!"

"Your brother is right. He's not worth it," murmured Cloud Mover. "If Wind Spirit did, in fact, touch me, it's my gift and none of his business. Five Eagles has bad blood for me. I think he's touched by the Dark Spirit."

"You think so?" Running Calf looked at his father.

"Yes, my son." He frowned. "Now please sit down. I know my mind." Turning to the others now, he exclaimed solemnly, "The Wind Spirit saved the hunters!"

"So," Three Stags raised an eyebrow, "Cloud Mover speaks for the Wind Spirit."

"No, I speak for myself," he spoke with great authority. "I *listen* to the Wind Spirit. I have his ear!"

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That night the hunters went to bed hungry in their mammoth hide tents. The women were able to feed themselves and their children from a meager store of jerky in their tents, but it only dulled their hunger. The unexpected storm had changed everything. The following morning found the hunters searching for the herds that had been dispersed by the storm. After dismantling their tents and packing up their belongings, they joined other bands, numbering many hundreds in Eastern Siberia, and continued to follow the herds of caribou, ox, mammoth, and bison.

After following the migrating herds, the land began to change. The forests disappeared, replaced by a bleak and increasingly frigid landscape, and yet the hunters were drawn further and further along, dependent upon the beasts. Several of the old ones in other bands, who couldn't keep up, were now left behind. Because of his special status among the caribou hunters now, though, Cloud Mover wouldn't suffer the same fate as Hawk Nose and other old men and women. Once more, after hastily rising and putting on his camouflage hood and grabbing his walking cane and knife, he had joined the men of his band, who, in turn, joined the other bands heading east, moving ahead of the baggage train of women, children, and elders able to carry their own weight.

Cloud Mover had never seen a sky so cloudless and a land so barren. Had it not been for the dark dots ahead indicating game and the outline of distant hills, he would have been fearful. It was, complained many of his people, not too late to turn back from this unfriendly land. But to a seasoned hunter and trapper as himself, it was both practically and logically too late. The herds were in motion. Without them, his people would starve. To stay behind meant death. So they must move on.

Their course—due east—was set. Several weeks ago the Wind Spirit saved the hunters from disaster. Only just yesterday, as they reached the caribou herd, one of them—in the form of whirling dust, had risen on Cloud Mover's path. Unlike before, in the taiga, where there were trees, streams, rain, and snow and where the wind blew where it wished, the tundra on which they moved, was often still and lifeless, with sparse grass, scrub pines, and little moisture. A cold wind came from the north. It was nothing like the land they had left. Over generations, the nomads who began their journey in the Eurasian Steppes, found themselves thousands of miles from their homeland. Since Cloud Mover's people worshiped Wind Spirit, the appearance of the north wind, which had been blowing all day, was portentous.

During a brief encampment beside scrub pines, haunting reminders of the large fir and hardwood trees growing on the taiga, Cloud Mover prayed to the Wind Spirit for guidance. Many of his people wanted to return west. Surely, they reasoned, they could find more herds. This seemed madness. Cloud Mover was certain that the spirit he recently saw, whom he identified as Wind Spirit, was leading them. He also took it as a sign when strange lights, as those burning from a great fire, had danced low in the sky. He sensed a medicine more powerful than even the wind or his band's totem, the cave bear. Now the lights were gone, and there were no clouds in the sky. They had not seen a bear for several months. They were moving in a land of endless day because of the appearance of so many herds. Wind Spirit was guiding them, but where? He wondered now.

Cloud Mover felt chosen, a feeling hard for him to grasp let alone explain. It wasn't magic this time; it was something else. When asked by other hunters how he was so certain, he found it difficult to explain. Why did Wind Spirit only talk to him? He kept asking himself. Most of the weary hunters and their families now saw the migration as a practical matter, which had nothing to do with religion.... But Cloud Mover knew better. A word for their trek east he couldn't define in his language grew in his mind... *destiny*.

Today he felt his seventy winters all at once it seemed. He was far behind the hunters. Behind him was the baggage train, the bands straggling for over a kilometer dangerously vulnerable to predators. Not knowing that their footsteps were the first aimed in the direction of a New World, Cloud Mover forced his weary legs with little inspiration now. Greatly worried at times by the strange landscape, he was acutely reminded of the striking difference between this wasteland and their past life in the taiga of Siberia. Blank curiosity, more than illumination, prickled him now. They had begun descending into a great flat valley: the westernmost edge of the Bering Strait. A great wall of ice had been their western boundary for several days, but now it had vanished finally behind a low lying crest of clouds, which were the only reminder of the tundra they left behind.

Ahead of Running Calf, who would lead the hunt today, were straggling caribou—the calves and weakest of the herd, which would be the first members of the herd killed. Running Calf wasn't the actual leader of his or any other band. With Cloud Mover's change of status, that hadn't been decided. Running Calf was merely in charge of the hunt today. He felt no honor in it, only a sense of duty. Shielding his eyes from the merciless sun, he searched the trail behind for Cloud Mover, his father. His father was slowing down increasingly, becoming a drag on the hunters, so typical of old men. Because of his apparent magic, however, he wouldn't be abandoned. Cloud Mover would keep walking until he dropped dead. On this fateful day, all of the foot worn and hungry people seemed to be a sorry and misbegotten lot. Because his race hadn't yet developed the epicanthic folds that would protect his eyes from the arctic glare, the sun smarted Running Calf's eyes. Shutting them reflexively, he turned away. Not knowing that he and his people were the first humans to cross the Bering Strait, he drew his hood down and adjusted the antlers on his head, clutched his barbed spear, and led the first Americans into the New World.

## Whispers-In-The-Wind

The elders wrung their hands in despair. It hadn't rained for several months. As a result, a drought settled upon their land. With the hot wind and dust blowing, there also came the desert locusts, which ate the meager plants to supplement their diet. Because of the drought and hot wind, game became scarce, and they were forced into adding the locusts to their diet. They continued, in spite of the furnace-like heat and great clouds of dust, to scratch out a harsh and lean existence from the Great Basin, until a desert fire turned much of their subsistence area into barren black ground.

During the fire, it seemed as though Great Spirit had decided to end their miserable plight once and for all. In spite of it all, however, the elders continued to pray:

"Save us Great Spirit; we are your chosen. You brought across the ice, over the mountains, and into this dying land to test us and bend us to your will. Do not abandon us now. Show us what to do. Help us to find rabbits and send us rain to grow our plants. Don't let us die of hunger or thirst!"

Day after day, as starvation set in, the elders prayed. They prayed steadfastly to Great Spirit and performed the required rituals, but Great Spirit, who had not spoken to a man or woman within the memories of the oldest elder of the people, remained silent. Now Gray Fox, leader of the Red Mountain Band and oldest living elder, was delirious and sinking fast. His illness and inability to preside during the crises seemed especially ominous.

"Why had Great Spirit not spoken?" they now asked. "Was Gray Fox's sickness another sign of his displeasure? What had their patriarch done to deserve the black sleep?"

Again they prayed, performed the required rituals, and once more sprinkled dust to the four winds—foolish as it seemed. But the answer did not come, and Gray Fox fell into a deep coma—the black sleep, in which he would never return.

When the food was almost gone and water was scarce, the old and the very young began dying, beginning with the band's patriarch, himself, then the newborns, followed by children as yet unweaned. These catastrophes seemed to be proof that Great Spirit was angry with them and was about to thin out the people until only the most fit were left to breed. Perhaps he would destroy most of them this time, as he once did in the far north, when Stone Hand, the great sage, and his family were spared and allowed to go south. This legend, carried down from generation to generation, gave no comfort to the mothers whose infants were dying before their eyes. Nor did it comfort the children whose hollow eyes held the shadow of death. But for the elders, it was a reminder that at least the strong would survive.

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For several more days the elders quarreled about the omens so far. To Old Raven and Walking Sticks, the chief religious leaders, it was a test from Great Spirit that they must pass. In their stubborn minds they saw this arid valley as the Promised Land. Someday, it would return to its normal self (hot, dry, with sparse vegetation, and meager game). For many of the elders and young men, this thinking would not suffice. Great Spirit, they were certain, was not listening. The patriarch's death was proof of this. In order to survive, they would have to leave this barren land. Perhaps, Great Spirit had forsaken them, or maybe this was his way of telling

them that it was time to move on. Since in their language there was no word for change, it was difficult for them to express this desire.

As one young man said as he watched his mother die, “The black sleep creeps over this land. Let us do as Stone Hand once did and head south.”

“But where will that take us?” they asked him, as he began building a travois to carry his mother.

“You can stay if you wish,” the young man said with resolution. “But I’m taking my mother and brothers south. I don’t believe Great Spirit wants us to die.”

With that simple declaration, Dream Rider became the first of his people to leave the Promised Land and trek south. Following him hesitantly, were other young men and one crotchety old man, Whispers-In-The-Wind, who had argued with the other elders but had given up in despair.

“Soon Great Spirit will speak,” he promised them feebly. “For now, the Great Wolf is asleep. Come old cousins, let us follow Dream Rider. It is better to die walking than wait for the black sleep to come.”

After he turned his back, he could hear other moccasins in the dust, and he knew that his example was still strong in his band. Not far from their camp two other groups of families led by Crow Foot and his father-in-law, Walking Rabbit, had already broken with the elders of their band.

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When Crow Foot’s daughter heard Dream Rider and then the old elder speak, she snuck away with two of her children and hurried to her father’s camp. Her husband, whose father was Old Raven, the chief elder among his band, had refused to leave their camp. To save her children and herself, she knew she had to go to her father’s band. Upon reaching his people, she immediately told them what the other band had decided to do. The Fire Creek band had been decimated by hunger and disease, and yet the elders begged them not to leave. Crow Foot, who was, himself, an elder of the band, was, at that very moment, trying to talk as many of his band members into leaving as he could. When his daughter told him that Whispers-In-the-Wind had followed Dream Rider south, he related this to several of the doubters as evidence that Great Spirit wanted them to leave. That such a great sage had followed such a young man was a sign that their people must move.

“It is time act... to be different,” he insisted, groping for the right words. “The old thinking doesn’t work anymore. We can follow the Coyote and Tortoise Bands or follow those elders to the Land of the Dead.”

Turning to his daughter and her children, he then motioned for old Walking Sticks and all the others who had openly broken with elders refusing to leave. With almost all of the Rabbit and Lizard bands following his example, Crow Foot, the third great leader of their people went forth, arm-in-arm with his daughter and wife, away from the Promised Land into the unknown.

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After Snake Singer, the oldest living elder, built a signal fire of dry brush, the remaining bands saw the migration written in the cloudless sky. Two Moons, a young elder of the Badger Band, had already talked most of his immediate family into leaving. With resignation in their vacant eyes the remainder of his band, including Two Moon’s father, yielded to the message

from afar. By the time they had passed the next band's encampment, most of his people would be on the desert, heading south.

In the forefront of these small and decimated bands was Two Moons, the fourth great leader of the migration. Unlike many primitive peoples who, in times of strife, might abandon their old and sick in order to conserve water and food, their religion demanded that they care for the dying until the very end. Each self-made trailblazer tried on his own to forcibly prod the old people along. Sick people would be carried, if need be, on travois until their destination was reached. On this fateful day, it was especially tragic to die in this desolate land, and yet many of the stubborn old men and women refused to budge.

Although Two Moons managed to coax his own father along, the remaining elders of his band, which included some of his own relatives sat down in the desert and watched their people depart, sending curses after them as they walked dejectedly away.

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Among the stragglers of the Toad Band, reluctantly leading the remnant of his father's band and bitter about the hopelessness of his own plight was Old Raven's son, Shadow Maker, whose wife had rejoined her father's band. A dark vapor already controlled Shadow Maker's spirit. Named because of a vision he claimed he once had, Shadow Maker's vision mirrored his membership with the religious elite of his people: falsity. In his spirit quest he had traveled across the burning desert in order to have the required communion with Great Spirit. But on the way, he had been detoured by Soul Catcher, who whispered into his delirious mind:

"You are my child. Henceforth I will call you Shadow Maker. When your people leave this sacred land, they will be leaving their god. You will fill the emptiness when you become the leader of the bands. Your great magic will be to convince them that Great Spirit does not exist. After this is done, you will lead them to me!"

Terrified by the message and the apparition of a great dark bird flying overhead, he ran back to his band, and told them what he had seen. But he failed to tell them all he heard. He also left one important fact out: the source of the voice. Now, after all these years, he realized that he had been following Soul Catcher for years. He was sure that he was following him now and that the prophecy was about to be fulfilled. As Shadow Maker led his band south, he could see the dust from other band several hills ahead. Behind him on the desert were the Fire Creek and Badger bands. To the west of them, would trail in the remaining bands of his people. When night came, they would all assemble as they had in the past to acknowledge a new patriarch, as they had done when selecting Gray Fox.

Traditionally, this election would be symbolic, since the patriarch was a focal point for religious ceremonies. The only other times that they would regroup would be for special rabbit drives or warfare against hostile bands. Afterwards, each headman, who acted as elector for his band, would return to his own camp and govern his own family as he saw fit. But this time would be different. They would not simply elect a new leader, and go their own ways. Shadow Maker, knew more than any other elder, that a new age was about to dawn. The old ways would have to change if his people were to survive. The new patriarch would not merely be a religious leader. He must have the powers of a father over his family or a master over his dog. Since the prophecy was half filled, Shadow Maker wondered what Soul Catcher had in mind for him now: leadership of his people or something else. Perhaps, he would have to bide his time until he was old enough for such a task.

Normally, patriarchs were elected from families who had provided leadership in the past, such as the Red Mountain band. Of course, the most important qualifications were age and piety. Traditionally, patriarchs were quite old. Gray Fox had been alive seventy summers before he was called. He had also spent most of his life celibate, fasting, and doing homage to Great Spirit. Since Shadow Maker had never been pious a day of his life and was one of the youngest elders of his band, he doubted if he would be elected. Although Stone Hand had only been a young man when Great Spirit chose him to gather the faithful and begin the long journey south, such an exception was rare in their tradition. Standing Rock, in fact, the patriarch who led them finally into the Great Basin and the Promised Land so long ago, was over one hundred years old. So the odds seemed to be against him unless the elders decided to bend the rules.

"Please, Soul Catcher," he whispered to himself, "let them elect Whispers-In-The-Wind or Two Moons. I'm not ready for such a task!"

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From the Great Basin, which had been their home for thousands of years, they began their last migration; a journey that had begun thousands of years ago in the land across the ice. Over a barren, nearly featureless desert, broken only by sagebrush, yucca, and an occasional oasis of cottonwood or pine, they moved in a long straggling file, until congregating as one group in a dry streambed that night. Several men and women had gone ahead to prepare fires and forage for food. Unfortunately for many of the old and infirmed, this would be the night in which the black sleep came. Everyone, except the very young, would go to sleep hungry, because of the meager game to be found. Too exhausted to build shelters or prepare their beds, most of them collapsed where they stopped, although a few guards sat stony-eyed before their fires trying desperately to stay awake. Among the self-appointed shepherds, alone, except for the unconscious presence of his family nearby, sat Dream Rider, his dark eyes staring deeply into the fire.

A backdrop of moonlit night and ghostly barren hills outlined his frame, while the blaze gave his brown skin an ethereal glow. Out of nowhere, it seemed, appeared Whispers-In-The-Wind, hobbling on the gnarled crutch fashioned from a manzanita bush. For him, the black sleep seemed always near, and yet his haggard face could always smile and his withered limbs were always quick. Tonight, however, Whispers-In-The-Wind remained silent and moody as he joined Dream Rider by the fire.

When it became apparent that the old man would not go away, the young man coaxed him to get his rest. "Go to sleep old one. We have a long journey ahead."

"Tomorrow is an important day," the old man replied faintly, throwing branches onto the fire.

"Tonight is important, too," Dream Rider said, looking back at his family and then raising his eyes to the starless sky. "I have felt it following me since we began. There is an evil presence in this camp since the Toad band arrived. I've never trusted Shadow Maker, an elder of that band."

"We must join to live." Whispers-In-The-Wind set his jaw. "Now, because Great Spirit leads us, we are no longer Snakes, Rabbits, Badgers, or Toads; we are one people. When we reach the mountains, we must have one leader, not a bunch of quarreling men."

"One leader?" Dream Rider sighed. "Who would want such a task?"

"I don't know.... I hope it's not me." The old man shrugged. Rising onto his cane, he began hobbling into the dark. "I must walk a ways before I can sleep," Dream Rider heard him mumble to himself, as he began climbing a nearby hill.

For a while, until he disappeared into the desert, Dream Rider watched his crotchety walk, amazed by his stamina at such a time. When everyone else was too tired to even think, this old sage was wandering the desert absorbed in his thoughts. A pang of shame filled Dream Rider as he watched him retreat. Tomorrow, he promised himself, he would listen more patiently to Whispers-In-The-Wind. He was a kind, considerate, and generous old man. But tonight he, too, must take his own advice and get some rest. When his watch was up and his relief made the correct call, he would begin wandering the dream world awhile. He needed guidance after today. In spite of hunger and exhaustion, his premonition was still strong.

At first, after hearing his relief's call, he felt something terrible hovering over the camp, as if a great dark bird was circling in the sky. His concern for his mother and sisters remained a constant torment, and now, as he fell into a deep yet troubled sleep, he felt as if the black sleep would take them all.

As Dream Rider and his people slept, Cactus Breeze groggily took the watch by Dream Rider's fire, while Shadow Maker, Little Dog, Cloud Dancer, and Eye-On-The-Ground took their posts on the four corners of the camp. While they sat at their posts, Whispers-In-The-Wind sat on a hill watching his entire nation sleep. It was the most peaceful and saddest sight he had ever seen: a people he sensed, without knowing the words, in transition, who must change drastically if they were to survive. Somewhere to his left he heard the chirp of a cricket and then the crunch of pebbles and twigs as an animal, probably a coyote, lurked on the hill. The moon above was like a great torch over his people. Where it not for the shadow of this hill, they would barely need their fires. And yet, as Dream Rider correctly saw, there was a shadow over them now: death. How many would die only the morning would tell. For a moment, as the old man prayed, he shut his eyes tightly against this world. The world inside his mind was filled with a great faith, but the body without was on the verge of collapse. Rising shakily on his cane and heading back down the slope, he was drawn by the nearest fire. Not realizing how late it was, he expected Dream Rider to still be sitting by the fire. Instead, he saw two other men in the glow: one of them, Cactus Breeze, was nearly asleep. The other, who sat quietly nearby, said nothing as Whispers-In-The-Wind approached.

"Good, the fire is still tall," he murmured to them as he approached the fire.

"I see only darkness." Cactus Breeze complained. "I've never felt so tired in my life."

"Sleep, your replacement is here," the old man observed. "Strange, I don't remember that face before."

"Wha-what face? My relief is Three Birds," the young man's voice trailed off as he slumped onto the ground.

"Three Birds?" The old man shook his head. "That boy is too young to stand watch." "You're not Three Birds." He then looked across the fire. "Come to think of it, I don't remember seeing you before!"

The man, who had the same loincloth and cape that all the other people wore, looked increasingly familiar the closer he came, reminding the old sage of countless men from his past... Uncle White Dog,... the kindly old Whistling Waters,... and then He-Who-Sat-In-A-Cave, a sage who had interpreted his dream. He remembered then the voice that had come to him that terrible night when the desert wind trapped him on that hill. At first it had been a whisper, as the specter extended his hand. "Don't be afraid," he had whispered to him. The

sages, after listening to him relate his dream, named him Whispers-In-The-Wind. Now, as he drew back fearfully, he realized that this stranger was saying the same things to him that the first spirit had spoken, first in a whisper and then with a gentle manly laugh: “Don’t be afraid.... I just want to share your fire.... Please stay; I’ve brought you something to eat.”

“Eat?” the old man said hoarsely. “Eat what?... Dried yucca?... Pine needles? . . . We have no food here. If you have any food, you must give it to the children.”

Holding out a sack, the man said firmly, “You must eat old man, or you’ll die. Here take a handful. Tomorrow you will lead your people toward a new land.”

“I will lead no one nowhere,” the old man scoffed, taking a handful of the substance in the bag.

It tasted like dried berries and jerky but was, at this stage, the most delicious morsel the old man had ever eaten. As he gobbled up the mixture, he noticed that the man was stoking the fire, but had not touched the bag. He wore his hair in the traditional fashion: long and uncombed, except one long braid signifying the age of the man. Whispers-In-The-Wind had seventy knots in his braid, while this young man had countless knots extending down his back.

Since it was impossible for a young man to have so long a braid, the old man was ready, when he had finished chewing, to make an issue of the knots. But before he had a chance to speak, the young man bolted up suddenly and pointed to the sky.

“Shush!” He placed his finger before his lips. “It’s passing overhead. Listen, do you hear his wings?”

“Dream Rider was talking like that. You’ve both been eating mushrooms,” the old man replied flatly. “The only things flying over us now are buzzards and a few crows, waiting to pick our bones.”

“Look! Over there!” The man pointed to one dark speck. “Since when do buzzards fly over the desert at night?”

“Perhaps it’s an owl searching for a rabbit,” the old man persisted, feeling a cold wind blowing his way.

“You are afraid, admit it old man.... You know who it is. He’s been following your people since your journey began.”

“You mean Soul Catcher—the Evil One?” The old man tried not to sound frightened.

The truth was now he had seen something flying overhead but kept his attention riveted on the man. Finding a strange strength in his presence, he let the shadow pass over without another word, before he lowered his crotchety old frame onto a log. Without seeing movement or hearing a sound, the young man seated himself beside him and placed a heavy hand on his knee.

“Listen to me Whispers-In-The-Wind,” he said softly at first. “Your people won’t perish; they will someday bring forth a new prophet who will bring new hope to the world.”

“We are a simple people who want nothing to do with other people,” the old man explained, looking back into the fire.

“From such strangers, I was first known,” he said cryptically, rising to his feet. “Now over half of the world believe in me and yet they are as divided as the pebbles below our feet. This will change when he comes. In deed, it must change because in those days the world, even for your people, will be a dark and evil place.”

Understanding fell slowly over Whispers-In-The-Wind. For his people, the concept “world” was impossible to define. Change was also incomprehensible in their minds, and yet, when the full meaning of his words registered in his tired mind, the old man understood these concepts clearly, and knew how very important this prophet would be.... But why was he telling

him this? Why not Two Moons, Crow Foot or one of the younger men? Surely such a revelation was wasted on his weary old bones.

When he opened his mouth to speak, he realized that he was staring into empty space. The young man had vanished during the blinking of his eyes. And yet Whispers-In-The-Wind, the greatest living elder, knew he would never again be alone... Great Spirit, the great god, at last, had spoken—in person, and he had spoken to him!

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Although Whispers-In-The-Wind wanted to wake his favorite pupil, Dream Rider, he knew that the young man would not believe him at this late hour. The boy needed his sleep, as he did himself. After such an experience the old man wanted to dream. In such dreams, he had gained wisdom. According to tradition, all creation began from Great Spirit, if that was his name, who walked and talked like a man. Now, the old elder questioned tradition. How could he explain this to his people? This wasn't a vision quest in which he would awaken with newfound wisdom. He wasn't dreaming now. That man came during his wake-up hours; he had been flesh and blood and spoke like a man. Henceforth, Whispers-In-The-Wind would have his own special name for him: Walks-Like-A-Man. Sleep would, he still believed, bring wisdom, but it couldn't replace direct communion with their god... And that's who the young man was.

"You must talk to Great Spirit," he had always told his students. "Don't wait for him to talk to you."

Strange, however, how he had never totally believed his own words. They were words based upon hope. The growing heresy in his heart, that wondered if the dream world was not an old man's tale, now seemed to be correct. He knew that Great Spirit would return to him and bring him wisdom, but he would talk to him in plain, undream-like words, in his thoughts or from the clear sky. A bittersweet sadness filled the old sage when he realized what Walks-Like-A-Man meant. From this day forward, his people had a destiny that was intended for other people too. Things would change and never be the same. Tonight was the beginning of a new age, and he, Whispers-In-The-Wind, was the first man on earth to know.

# Creation

## Primal God

Within himself he remained, total mind and pure spirit, having no sensation of sight, sound, or touch. Unaware of outside stimuli, he felt no need for companionship. He had his thoughts; all knowledge and wisdom had been forever his. With nothing to see, hear, or feel, he had no need of senses. Unaware of hot or cold, he felt no discomfort. Inside his infinite mind lie the potential for ultimate creation or destruction. But in the beginning he was unaware of his power. He was like a fetus encased forever in a womb with no need to be born. There was, for him no outside to view and no place to go. There was no top or bottom, north, south, east, or west. There was no darkness or light. It was an invisible world, without dimension, physical perception, or time. And yet an identity filled him, carried from the beginning of time.... He was God.... He had always been.... He would always be.

After a billion more years had passed, he became aware also of a purpose: something he must do. At first, he ignored this purpose, because it had no meaning in his small, insignificant world. He felt secure and content here. He could while away eternity in the ambience of his own thoughts. There was no immediacy or import to being God. What was so important that he must do?... When would he do it?... And how? These questions, having no apparent answer, hung pointlessly in his mind, until a knowledge came to him that had also been lying dormant since the beginning of time.... *He had power!*

What did this mean?... How was he supposed to use it?... On what?... What was the meaning of his identity and purpose? Shrinking from these thoughts into the comfort of his void, God delayed creation for another billion years.

But the implications were unshakable. At one fateful point in the infinitely tiny world that he knew, a feeling grew in his mind: curiosity. From what recess in his memory these thoughts originated, he couldn't fathom. Perhaps, as everything else he knew, they had always been. It didn't matter.... They were there to stay and grew in importance as he contemplated himself. They were, mixed together now, a catalyst, filling him with something that he knew about but didn't often feel: excitement. Thus, as a chain reaction, knowledge of himself begat curiosity, curiosity begat excitement, excitement begat desire, and desire begat temptation to test his unlimited power.

Was it his purpose to use his power? He wasn't sure. How to use his power and to what purpose was not yet evident in his mind. So he shrank into himself again, contemplating upon everything that he knew so far, until, after another billion years slipped by, his curiosity was too great to contain.

Without further delay, he began experimenting with his thoughts. In his mind's eye he could clearly see how powerful he might be. The imagery, though alien, showed entire galaxies set into motion by his command. But this was the dream world inside his mind, not the real world that awaited him now. Having only a mind to comprehend his task, he now created a body to act as a reference point and input gatherer for his world. At this stage, it would become a primitive sphere, incredibly dense but still invisible in the unseen void. Unsatisfied with this so far, he now gave himself awareness of the outside world with sight, sound, and touch. Gazing out into the void now, he saw only darkness and felt only his own mass. For the first time in eternity, he could see his domain: nothingness, stretching out before him into featureless black

space. He was aware of an unfathomable silence in the depths of space and was reminded that he was alone. Unable to see his own dark mass, filled with his own godhood now, he grew impatient. A great and uncompromising loneliness filled him as sat at the threshold of time.

### **Moment of Singularity**

At this point, time and space, matter and energy, darkness and light were the same. There was no universe because it had not been born. In this timeless void all creation was centered into one point: singularity, the tiniest microcosm that would ever exist. To make it even more insignificant was the fact that it blended in with the surrounding space: black on black, the total absence of light. So, after a brief pause, he made his decision: it was time to use his power. He must light the darkness. To do this required only one word. So God, having given himself a voice, uttered his first word in a whisper: *Begin!* In less than a nanosecond, the moment of singularity passed, and the plural universe was born. Ultimate matter was detonated into the greatest explosion the cosmos would ever know in the shortest interval of measurable time, an event that would one day be called the Big Bang.

Time had begun, and celestial mechanics were set into motion. All creation had been divided between darkness and light. Darkness, as the absence of light, had been defined by himself, and all light, so ignited, would continue to be an emanation of himself. For he *was* the light, and he *was* the Creation. Time, space, gravity, energy, and matter were, in a sense, still one, as part of the living and expanding God.

### **Lighting of the Cosmos**

The primal universe became a testing ground for God's power. Celestial mechanics, which would someday boggle the mind, began simply as an explosion, moving in all directions in a perfect and seemingly limitless sphere. At first, there were no galaxies or stars. There could be no structure for matter with such energy in motion. Atoms, electrons, and protons were in their most elementary forms. There was, during this primal universe, only the plasma thrown out by the Big Bang. For several more seconds, the infant cosmos glowed from the great heat generated by the blast. The plasma surrounding the point of detonation crackled from particle to particle, as would a great thunder sphere, becoming fainter the further it traveled from the core into space, until, ultimately, it ceased to glow entirely and began clumping into dense, spherical clouds of gas.

For an indeterminate period of time God pondered upon his creation, unsure of what to accomplish next. So far he had created energy, matter, and light. Now, by his infinite mind, the oldest clusters were being further defined into smaller clumps of gas. As in mitosis, each cluster was divided into galaxies, and each galaxy was further divided, until billions of individual spheres circled within their galaxies as the first dimly lit stars. During the creation of inanimate matter, God fashioned atoms, the building blocks of matter, from the plasma of the stars. At first, the lighter elements hydrogen and helium dominated. From these two gasses, solids, liquids, and all other gasses would take form. But for now, he was satisfied just to begin lighting the firmament from its outer edge. The pattern had been set. In the opposite direction of its detonation, therefore, the universe took shape: the coalescing of its gasses generating the electromagnetism and radiation required for ignition. So that, as viewed from afar, the celestial

lamp began glowing from its outer edge inward, clusters begetting galaxies, galaxies begetting stars, nuclear furnaces igniting, until, the entire cosmos was lit by God's eternal light.

Afterwards, ignoring the passage of time, God watched his plaything, as a child would focus upon his reflection in a pond. For this was indeed the face of God, as the Creator, burning with eternal and unyielding light. But as a child with terrible and unlimited power, he grew weary of the magnitude of it all. Surely there was more to his creation than this. Something was missing in this wondrous sight that, as yet, was only a vague dream.... Still the nagging questions returned to him from the dreamtime when all creation waited in the background of his thoughts.... Why was he here? What was his purpose? How far should his creation now go?

Moving indivisibly among his creation now, he noticed that each cluster contained millions of galaxies, and each galaxy contained billions of stars, but the stars, themselves (save for the atoms making up their mass), were the last units, beyond which, all else was cold, unlit space. Pulling out mass here and there, he created planets that would circle the chosen suns. Most stars were ignored. Some were too large, while others were too small. During this phase of creation, he experimented with matter, energy, and light.

### **The Creation of Earth**

An intermediate size star, which burned a steady yellow light, was chosen in the universe. Each planet circling the chosen star ranged in size from a tiny cloud of gas to giant mini-stars with nuclear furnaces of their own. The majority of the planets, however, were not large enough to sustain nuclear furnaces of their own. Nevertheless they were, for several million years, microcosms of the mother star. As great dust clouds settled upon themselves, their dim light grew in intensity. As electromagnetic particles bombarded each other, the primordial planets' gravity caused the dust clouds to settle, becoming denser the closer they came to the center of the cloud, until they began to appear as planetary orbs. For several million more years, these infant planets, reheated by their own electromagnetism and the implosion of their own mass, took on appearances that were vastly different than their mother star. Already, before their formation, God had transformed the basic elements of hydrogen and helium into more stable forms of matter. As in other quarters of the universe, these primal elements solidified slowly with each planet into beautiful menageries of molten fountains and streams. Excited by the potential of these sights but not sure which way to go, he allowed this natural process to run its course. Each planet, depending upon its distance from its sun, cooled slowly, becoming an inert satellite circling the sun. Electromagnetic fields within each planet continued to melt the internal magma in certain isolated spots, but for the most part they reflected a cold starlight. Those planets nearest the edge of the universe, reflected the coldest light, while those nearest the center, resembled more closely the original universe, in its primal state. Ignoring the inner clusters for several billion years, God concentrated upon random planets, which caught his eye.

### **Conception of the Angels**

During the second celestial day of creation, God felt a new emotion grow inside him: loneliness. After creating the Earth, which would forever trouble his thoughts, God sought companionship in his universe. Several possibilities appeared in his infinite mind, including spherical bodies, gaseous forms, and strange creatures with all manner of appendage and contour. It was then, as if an ancient purpose suddenly took hold, God created heaven, a place

where he could oversee creation. He now gave himself a peculiar form in which he could stroll through his domain. Seeing the beauty in this last creation, he duplicated his image a million fold, giving life to each of the angels comprising the heavenly host. Each angel, carrying a portion of the godhood, were as set pieces of creation.

At this stage in prehistory, there was already a hierarchy in heaven. Satan, however, the first angel created, stood alone as God's favorite for a while, swaggering around and boasting of his importance, until jealousy grew in the ranks. Matters grew so serious that Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Uriel, stepped forward to denounce him before God. According to Michael, a spokesman for his faction, Satan had compared himself to God. He had also criticized him for not giving his angels more power. Satan, speaking for a faction of like-minded angels, had swayed nearly a quarter of the host to his side. They were created in God's image and were part of the godhead, so why shouldn't they share in creation? Satan's faction were expelled immediately from heaven, a punitive action intended to prevent a civil war. While they were exiled indefinitely to outposts at the far edges of space, God kept Satan close to himself to keep an eye on him, a deed that angered Michael's faction that much more. Rumors filtered back to heaven that, to placate the ambitious Satan, God was, instead of finding a remote outpost to exile him, allowing him to create wonders on his own. It was not hard for Michael's faction to imagine how this might swell the archangel's unfathomable ego and make him even more insufferable than before. God's favorite angel, though expelled from heaven, would soon believe that he too was a god.

Eons later, Saint John the Divine, in a series of dreams, would misinterpret God's words to mean that there had been a war in heaven, but there had been no war. A rebellion had begun. Though strife had been averted, the universe had been populated with thousands of disenfranchised angels, who would one day become adversaries against God. At this stage of creation, however, Satan was still the favorite of God.

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On Earth, the medium sized world recently cooled to a tolerable state, the Lord, with Satan present, paused and allowed his archangel to make own display. At first Satan altered the planet's surface with a sudden shower of meteors that pock marked it until it bore little resemblance to what it was before. This act of destruction, not creation, was disappointing to God, and yet it triggered an interesting response, which led to the correct chemical balance on the world. After generating tremendous heat, the crust began to boil forth magma at a steadily increasing rate. Loose in the atmosphere were several kinds of gasses that would have been toxic to life yet would be basic for its development later on. Carbon dioxide, methane, and argon now swirled around the reforming planet, spewed from volcanoes and fissures in the crust. Molten metal and rock oozed over the young landscape, creating fiery rivers and bubbling caldrons that would someday be standard in the depths of hell. Great clouds of gasses coalesced and bombarded each other, mixing the primal gasses while generating electricity in the blackened sky. For all its nightmarish qualities, there was something remarkable happening on this planet, which Satan's act of destruction caused.... Rain began to fall upon the hot land, steaming instantly when hitting the molten streams. At first the rain was composed of hydrogen, methane, and argon liquids. As it poured ceaselessly upon the sweltering landscape, great clouds of steam joined the primal gasses, filtered of their toxic impurities, if for only a little while, until gradually, as the land cooled, and the rain fell, the clouds began to issue moisture that collected in ever increasing basins below, until, finally, a great ocean covered most of the crust.

Plunged into the ocean repeatedly, as a matter of course now, were smaller meteorites from the young atmosphere. A great wind blew upon the face of the deep caused in part by the gravity of the moon and the settling of the earth's crust. At one point, the natural forces of lightning and thunder were followed by great sheets of water onto the earth. After the deluge, out of sheer whim, God and his first archangel came closer and closer to the spectacular scene of dry, cooling land. Mountains were interspersed with smoldering volcanoes. A bejeweled assortment of minerals reflected on the landscape. A sky filled with ominous dark clouds greeted their dazzled eyes, the youthful sun's light breaking through to guide their steps. One day the land would break apart to form all the world's continents, but for now it was one great landmass, surrounded by a churning, lifeless, fresh water sea.

Upon the barren land, the Lord of the Universe and Satan moved on the third celestial day of creation, which was but a nanosecond in God's time but which was ten billion years after the Big Bang.

### **The Inception of Eden**

Having created the Earth, and allowing Satan a hand in its creation, God blessed it, setting it above all other celestial bodies in space. Standing guard on the new world, as an honor but also as a check on his power, was Satan, self-styled heir apparent, whose ambition had been stifled by this tribute. Though the universe was already very old, Earth was but an infant in the cosmos. It was upon this lonely outpost of steaming rocks and boiling seas that God and Satan walked for a while, pausing to reflect upon ongoing creation and the meaning of it all. On its dark side, beneath a looming lunar lamp, God looked out over a desolate landscape, filled again with purpose, and knew what he must do. Though Satan's friends had been given far worse outposts than him, the archangel was unhappy with his exile. The Lord knew that it was important to give him a special, long-range task. When he had created living beings like himself, they were, in effect, physically perfect as was the universe and heaven. Nothing, until he endowed the angels with freewill, had been left to chance. An idea was born in his infinite mind to begin at the very inception of life. Nothing that steamed, bubbled, oozed, or sat inert on this planet could move on its own, he explained tutorially to Satan. Though there was constant upheaval here, nothing lifeless could deliberately change, without the Word. Always, when the Word was uttered change occurred, but only at God's command.

It had been a perfect universe until then.

Satan looked up from the steaming earth now and said, "Give *me* the power of the Word."

The Lord of the Universe wagged his finger as he would at an over ambitious child. "You would be God?"

"No," the archangel shook his head, "just the Word. That's all I want."

"But the Word *is* God." He studied Satan's inscrutable face.

"Did I not send comets in motion?" Satan blustered. "Did I not rain meteors on this world?"

"That was *my* Word. I gave you the power," replied God. "You must understand one thing Satan: the Word comes through me. All other magic is evil without the Word. What you did was an act of destruction, not creation. Comets and meteors bring destruction to this world."

Stifling an argument brewing in his mind, Satan performed the only act possible in the presence of God, he bowed politely, and kept his silence. There would be no argument this time

with God about his divinity nor his power. Looking around at his domain, which God, himself, would fashion, he knew he was but the caretaker of this world, but it occurred to him, as they walked in silence over the barren ground, that it was nevertheless his.

“Lord,” he ventured politely, “I will be lonely. Will there be others to act as companions on this world?”

After thinking for a moment, God said slowly, with hesitation “After awhile, when I see a change, I will allow visitors from the heavenly host to come. If they have behaved themselves, I will allow your friends Sariel, Raguel, Raziel, and Remiel to visit you too.... I know you were thinking of rebellion, Satan. I regret now that I gave you and the others freewill.”

A discussion that would define sin for ages to come but also God’s future plans for creation, commenced between the Lord of the Universe and the Lord of Earth.

“Without freewill,” began Satan, “we are but mindless copies of yourself.”

“Is that how they perceive themselves?” God looked up at the firmament, as if he could see heaven from where he stood. “Copies of me, without identities?” “That’s absurd, Satan.” He turned suddenly to the archangel. “Who put that notion into your head?”

The archangel shrugged and said nothing, for, in deed, he thought of it all by himself.

“We are all replications of you, except for the Word,” he tactfully returned to the issue. “We know only what we suppose to know. All Creation is through your eyes and, because you are God, by your command.”

“You have said it,” God folded his arms. “From the smallest atom to the constellations and galaxies—all Creation is but a reflection and result of me.”

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A notion, born from knowledge stored in God’s infinite mind, caused him to pause abruptly and sit on a nearby rock. Freewill also meant diversity—a concept at odds with the control he demonstrated in creation. In spite of freewill, the elements and the angels, themselves, were, it was true, reflections or mere copies of himself. All he had accomplished by replicating himself and instilling in his angels freewill was a heaven filled with diverse personalities. Satan had been right about creation too: it was an automatic, unchanging process that depended upon divine whim. Chaos, which came with freedom, could not be avoided. Did his hand always have to stir things up? What if he left Creation alone—at least for a while? There was, at this point in the process, a great sameness and predictability to the firmament and heavenly host that depressed him. Boredom, the final emotion to be felt by God, had caused him to experiment with the elements in space. But now, returning to his sense of destiny, he decided to experiment with the very process of life. He would give living substance freedom as he had the angels but at the beginning: the very inception of life.

Reaching into the warm water of creation, He searched for a likely clump of matter. When He had found a large enough matrix to work with, He lifted it up and blew the breath of life into its molecules. Satan looked on in horror. Dropping the clump back into water close enough to the shoreline for him to sit and watch, he sat there intently, watching it float aimlessly around in the clear water: the first draft of a living thing.

“What is this magic,” the archangel muttered to himself. “What purpose is there in creating such evil things?”

”Nothing in Creation is evil,” replied God cagily. “Did I not create *you*? What purpose was there in *that*?”

The insinuation stung the archangel, who knew God had looked into his heart.

“When I’m finished planting this garden,” said God, “you will see wonders grow before your eyes greater than constellations or galaxies, and ones rivaling heaven too!”

“Grow?” Satan murmured numbly. “You are talking about time? How long will this growth be?”

“I don’t know,” God waved his hand lightly. “We’ll just have to see!”

“But you’re God, you have to know,” cried Satan as he watched the Creator’s ascent.

In a demonstration of his majesty, God rose up to heaven on a bed of dark clouds, which flashed from lightning, causing a drizzle of rain on Satan’s upturned face.

“I *do* know, Satan,” he shouted down, “... If I look into my memory I know *all* things. But *you* don’t. You shall *never* have that power. I leave you as the guardian of this world. As the caretaker, not the gardener, make sure my seeds prosper. Just don’t touch them; let them grow wild, for I have given them purpose and a will to thrive.”

“I shall call my kingdom ‘barren ground,’” Satan called bitterly after God, “for it is where I remain imprisoned for being a replication of God.”

Satan spat on his shadow and silently cursed God. The Creator, always merciful, would give the Prince of Earth one more chance.

“You are blessed among the angels,” God’s voice boomed down from the firmament. “You shall call the barren ground Eden, for in the days ahead it will radiate life to all corners of this world. You shall rule over it, as you could never do in heaven. Tend it well!”

“Rule?” Satan looked at his image in the sea. “All I see is rock and dark water. For eons my reflection in the waters will be the only face I see.”

A question swelled in Satan’s throat he prudently kept to himself. Seeing the misgivings on the archangel’s face, God added for emphasis, “Guard Eden well, Satan. I expect great things from you!”

Satan looked back down at the barren ground, head bowed, and began his long exile on Earth. At a latter day, God would come into the Prophet Ezekiel’s dream and, with sadness, speak of this bygone day:

“<sup>13</sup> You were in Eden, the garden of God. Every precious stone was your covering: carnelian, topaz, jasper, chrysolite, beryl, onyx, sapphire, carbuncle, and emerald. Wrought in gold were your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were created they were prepared. With an anointed guardian cherub I placed you. <sup>14</sup> You were on the holy mountain of God, and in the midst of the stones of fire you walked. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, until iniquity was found in you.” (Ezekiel 28: 13-14.)

## **Evolution Set In Motion**

Because air-breathing bacteria had not evolved yet, there was no oxygen on Earth. In its place was methane, which the earliest cells used in respiration. From these lowly globs, breathing methane instead of oxygen, the cells mutated, after the Creator’s management, and evolved into oxygen producing patches of cyanobacteria or blue-green algae. With this new gas being pumped into the atmosphere, God, looking down from the firmament, found that a greater diversity of living forms was possible. Satan, playing the part of spoiler, would, thinking God had not noticed, cause the new Earth to boil forth magma or allow a comet to break through, often bringing about the extinction of a sea animal or plant encroaching on the ground, but even this was part of God’s plan, just as out of the chaos of the Big Bang the jeweled firmament was

brought forth and with the imperfect nature of freewill beautiful and inscrutable angels had been born.

As a result of Satan's first act of destruction, the Earth's chemical balance was set on course. It was, however, from God's creation of the first non-celestial life form that the first oxygen breathing algae and bacteria evolved, producing more and more oxygen, sprouting into more diverse creatures, until the atmosphere was thick with a humid layer of air and a pungent evolutionary soup lapped on the shoreline and filled the churning sea. Looking out from the barren ground, Satan marveled at this first encroachment upon Eden. The earliest seaweed was being washed by the waves onto the primal beach. Already in anticipation of when plants would take hold to invade the land, the tide pools had become dotted with stromatolites (mounds of lime-bearing cyanobacteria), as well as mosses and lichens, the earliest land plants, which clung to tidal rocks. Within the hydrogen and oxygen saturated seas, among the primal soup, several thousand types of single cell organisms, including a few who tended to clump together, as did their green slime forefathers, swam densely throughout the watery world.

As would a chemist looking into a vial or an alchemist stirring his pot, the Creator played, as Satan looked on, in the primal sea. The archangel longed to stir things up himself. Green slime had transformed into algae and algae now evolved into a myriad of sea plants, which the surf continued to deposit on the shore. The barren land, which would one day become Eden, looked more desolate by this effect, and yet Satan felt hopeful now that his exile would one day come to an end.

Impatient that the process took so long and that creation was passing him by, Satan began looking for the gardener, who was spending so much time by the shore. The first animals, evolving from bacteria, were simple bell shaped creatures, whose whip-like tentacles and adaptable body features would propel them into numerous orders, including sponges, jelly fishes, and yet higher forms of life. The gardener had reached an interesting stage, in which there were filmy willow-o'the-wisp, segmented, and hideous pulsating creatures swimming in the sea, which drew the attention of Satan, who was this moment walking across the barren ground.

"My Lord," he began, "what need have you of these monstrosities?"

"Nothing I have created is monstrous," replied God. "All has a purpose in a latter day."

"But these creatures are ugly," protested the archangel, "There's no beauty in the sea."

"Ugly?" God's enigmatic face broke into a smile. "Nothing in Creation is ugly, Satan. Did I not create you?"

Knowing this angel's heart, he remained silent. So Satan cloaked his criticism in polite terms. "My Lord, you have lit the darkness; your Creation is done. Such nasty things are beneath you. Why bother so with this insignificant world?"

"This is *your* world I am tending, is it not Satan?" challenged God.

The question stopped Satan cold. His world—not just a caretaker—but his world. Raising up a small trilobite that crawled, as would a latter day cockroach in his great palm, the Lord chided the archangel gently: "Satan, are you jealous of my creation? These creatures I leave to evolution, which is my creation too. Let's wait and see what it brings."

Reaching down into tide pool, he brought up a slimy, jelly-like creature that looked like a vase: "Behold, Satan, from this humble one comes great things."

"Surely, you jest," Satan looked down at the hideous creature with amazement.

The translucent creature pulsated in God's hand. The archangel drew closer, mumbling to himself.

“I don’t understand,” he made a face. “Please explain this evolution. Is it a part of Creation? If it is part of Creation, I bow to you plan.”

“It is part of my plan.” He now tested the angel’s will.

As God held it out to him, Satan bowed to this lowly blob. He knew that Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael would have followed suit as did all of the other angels, but Satan could not tolerate this sycophancy, even to God. Shuddering at the lowly glob, he felt a wretch deep in his throat. A great dread filled him, when he realized what he had done. And yet the Creator, as always, forgave him and gave him a gentle pat.

“You must learn humility.” He gave Satan an enigmatic smile. “When you have seen life creep onto and take hold of the land, you shall begin loving this world. I can see the future Satan. Believe me, you will love Eden especially. I have great things in store for this land.”

Satan gave him a thoughtful expression, bowing faintly as God returned the glob to the sea. He thought about his allies, Sariel, Raguel, Raziel, and Remiel, who had also been exiled to various outposts in space. His exile was the best. He decided to bide his time here on the barren ground until Eden became a garden. It would be much different if there were beautiful life forms growing here. He might even begin to like it... It was much better than whiling away eternity on a cold lifeless world.

“What will happen to the others?” He motioned to the sky.

“Their worlds will never rise to the level of yours,” explained the Lord. “Someday, if you all behave yourself, I will let you return.”

“To heaven?” Satan brightened.

“For awhile,” replied the Lord, “and I will let the others return too,... but as visitors. The universe, a much wider kingdom, is theirs.”

“I can leave the barren ground and visit my friends?” Satan pressed forward, greatly excited about what he had heard.

“When my garden has begun, but only for a spell,” the Lord said. “After all, you are the caretaker of this world. Look at the progress, Satan. Are you so anxious to leave Eden now?”

“This world is not my home,” Satan replied stubbornly. “Please let me be with my friends.”

“To plot against me and to rebel?” The Creator searched Satan’s thoughts. “Foolish servant, I know what you have in mind. Visit yes, but you’ll never be left alone with your friends!”

“What can I do to make you believe I’ve changed?” Satan wailed, as God ascended once more into the clouds. “I have been marooned on the barren ground for eons without complaint. Still the land you call Eden is barren. When will life encroach on this world, so I can go home?”

“Understand this, Satan,” roared the Lord, “I never said you could permanently leave this world. As a visitor you will return one day to heaven, and as a visitor you can visit you friends in space.... But you are the caretaker of this world. Be thankful I didn’t exile you somewhere else: an asteroid, a frozen comet, or an eternally lifeless world. Tend to my garden!”

“*What garden?*” Asked Satan looking at the barren ground.

<sup>12</sup> How you are fallen from heaven, O shining star, son of the morning! You have been thrown down to the earth ... “ (Isaiah 14:12)

## **Michael Advises God**

During each eon in which the gardener continued to fashion Eden, Satan, the caretaker of Earth, looked on with envious eyes. Though God had given him dominion, he had not given him the Word. Despite his onetime standing with God, he was known in heaven as a rebel and yet, to keep an eye on him, God had entrusted him with Earth. This fact galled Michael, who, though the chief angel in heaven now, had no world of his own.

“My Lord, this is a mistake,” he complained, while approaching God.

“Michael,” he motioned with his hand, “walk with me.”

“You must not trust Satan,” the archangel persisted. Though fearful of arguing with him, Michael, the Lord’s favorite now, wished to confide his misgivings with God.

“Are you jealous of him?” the Lord asked finally. “I’ve sent Satan into exile. Why would you begrudge him that?”

“If I am jealous of Satan,” said Michael, “he is envious of you. I have never been jealous of my creator.”

“An honest answer,” nodded God. “You admit being envious of Satan, and yet you begrudge him for being envious of me. Tell me why that is different archangel.”

Michael thought about this a moment, though he knew the answer.

At this time, long before the age of man, the Creator had no throne and walked almost as an equal among the angels. But Michael, unlike Satan, knew where to draw the line. This simply dressed being was—the word came back to him slowly to him.... God. Also plaguing the archangel’s mind was another notion, more troubling than this.... Satan was evil. He was merely biding his time until he would attempt to overthrow God.

”You are the Creator—the first being.... You are God!” Michael finally replied.

## **Adam and Eve: The First Mortals**

When Michael returned to heaven, God remained on earth—its creator and gardener, walking alone among the trees. As he admired his creation, he took mud from the side of stream and molded a likeness of himself. Breathing into the shape, he watched as its eyes opened and he began to live. Thus, by divine whim, God created man. His eyes opened, he was set down upon his legs, and he took his first steps. God called this creature Adam. Looking around at the garden in which they walked, he set it apart from the world, calling it Eden. In the garden, he warned Adam, you are safe. Outside you shall die. Beautiful trees and flowers grew everywhere and all manner of berries and fruits. Birds sang in the trees, the stream that flowed through the valley was filled with fish, and animals roamed peacefully in the meadow nearby. In the meadow, after he stationed Adam upon a rock, the first man was given the task of naming all the creatures. Many hours passed as Adam gave titles God’s to creation.

Despite the cornucopia available to Adam, the first man had looked into the stream and saw himself. He was much different than other creatures. He longed for another mortal to be by his side. God saw Adam’s mood and understood it. Invisible now, he moved as a breeze across Adam’s face.

“You have everything, Adam,” he whispered into his ear, “food, shelter, and protection, but you are alone.”

“Yes, My Lord,” he nodded. “I love your creation, but I have no one to talk to and no one to share my life.”

“As you wish,” God said faintly.

Suddenly weary, the first man nestled beside the stream and fell into a deep sleep. While he slept, the Lord took one of Adam’s ribs and fashioned a new creature similar to Adam. She was, as Adam, perfect in every way. When Adam was awakened, she stood there before him. A shaft of light from the treetops highlighted her golden hair and blue eyes. Adam was overjoyed with this sight.

“Behold Adam,” the Creator boomed, “I’ve given you a soul mate—Eve, the first woman. Now listen my children. Eden is your garden; here you’re safe. Everything you need is here. I have taken care of the garden, but now it’s your task to tend to Eden. All this is yours to maintain, except one tree. You may look upon this tree, but don’t eat its fruit. Don’t even touch it; give it a wide berth.”

Eve’s eyes widened, “Tell us where it is, Lord, so we can avoid the tree. How else will we know?”

“You will know the tree when you see it,” replied God. “It is like no other tree in the garden. If you eat its fruit, you will have knowledge of good and evil. You will lose your immortality; in fact one day you will die.”

Though God didn’t mean that Adam and Eve would drop down dead the moment they ate the fruit from the tree, the very thought frightened Adam. Eve, however, shrugged off the warning. She was more inquisitive than her mate and therefore susceptible to Satan’s temptation and challenge to her freewill. One day, in fact, when Adam and Eve were gathering berries for dinner and Adam left her alone in her side of the forest for a while, she heard a silky voice behind her.

“Is it true?” the voice asked softly. “Has God told you that you can eat the fruit from all the trees?”

Eve turned around to see a beautiful, multicolored snake talking to her, replying innocently, “God has told us we can eat all the fruit except for what grows on the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. He warned us that if we did, we would surely die!”

“That’s not true!” relied the serpent. “How could such a lovely fruit do you harm? God knows that if you eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil you’ll become just like him, and will be able to decide for yourself what is right and what is wrong.” “Now tell me,” he said softly, sliding further down the tree, “how could that be bad? Are you not made from his hands—the stuff of God, himself. How could it be wrong?”

Eve studied the fruit and wondered how it would taste. Much more important to her, though, was the thought that it might make her as wise and powerful as God. Hesitating in her last moment of innocence, she accepted the serpent’s lie and took a bite of the fruit. When Adam saw what she was doing, he flew into a rage

“Woman, what have you done?” he shouted. “We were warned not to eat that fruit. You know the consequences. God will punish you. He said you would die.”

“Look at me Adam,” she grinned mischievously, a gleam in her eyes, “do I look dead? I’ve never felt better in my life. My flesh tingles. My mind is filled with wondrous things!”

“Oh Eve!” Adam wept. “You will die and I’ll be left alone. Why did you disobey God?”

“The fruit of this tree is delicious. The Serpent told me that if I ate its fruit I would be like God, and that’s exactly how I feel.” “Here.” She offered, after picking a second piece of fruit. “Take a bite. You’ll see what I mean.”

In the depths of despair, knowing full well what his action meant, Adam took the fruit and studied it. While he analyzed it, turning it this way and that, the Serpent, who had tempted Eve watched from his branch. He was greatly amused. Eve now played the tempter. As her mate contemplated a world without her, he shrugged his shoulders, lifted the fruit up, and took a bite. That moment, as Adam succumbed to temptation, Eve was struck with remorse, a feeling she had never experienced. Looking up into the tree, Adam saw the Serpent looking down, a grin on his sly face. In his newfound wisdom Adam knew who he was. Eve had been tricked by God’s adversary. He had been enticed by Eve. The first pangs of guilt filled the couple. They had disobeyed God and knew they had sinned. Because Eve had been left in the care of her mate, however, Adam’s sin was greater.

Knowing good and evil, they were aware of their sin and realized they were naked. Greatly ashamed, they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves then hid in the Garden of Eden to escape God’s wrath. As they cowered in the garden, they could hear footsteps—the crunch of leaves and swish of bushes. The sound that they heard was the Creator walking among the trees, not as a spirit but in the flesh.

“Where are you?” his voice boomed.

Holding Eve’s hand, Adam called from the woods. “Here we are Lord!”

“Come forth Adam!” he demanded. “Why do you hide?”

“We are afraid because we are naked.” Adam emerged slowly, with Eve not far behind.

“Who told you that you were naked?” roared God. “Have you eaten the fruit I commanded you not to eat?”

“Yes.” Adam sighed brokenly. “Eve gave it to me, and I took a bite.”

Having hung their heads in shame as they walked toward God, the couple now shielded their eyes. The countenance of God was both terrible and beautiful. The trees in the garden trembled and the ground shook beneath their feet.

“Woman, what have you done?” God shouted at Eve.

“The Serpent deceived me.” She pointed accusingly at the tree. “So I ate it, thinking it would make me wise like God.”

Looking up into the Tree of Knowledge where the serpent was coiled, God gave a wounded cry. “I entrust my garden to you, and this is my reward. In the body of a snake, you’ve corrupted my greatest creation. Because you have done this, you are cursed above all my creatures! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life!”

After consigning Satan to his role as deceiver of mankind, he turned to the woman. Adam and Eve were almost blinded by his presence. So that they could look upon him, his countenance became a shadow against the morning sun—the silhouette of a human like themselves, tall and majestic, an aura outlining his form.

“I warned you!” He wrung a finger. “But you didn’t believe. Because of your disobedience, Eve, I will make your pains in childbearing severe. With such labor you will give birth to children. Though your husband played the fool this hour, you shall obey him. No more shall you play the tempter. He shall rule over you as I rule over him.” “Was it worth, woman?” he added icily. “Did the fruit taste sweet?”

“I’m sorry my Lord!” wept Eve.

To Adam he spoke more harshly. “I gave you this woman that you should watch over her. Because you gave in to her temptation and ate the fruit I commanded you not to eat, cursed is the ground below you. Through painful toil, you will work the ground all your days. Though it produces thorns and thistles for you, you must eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat its food until you return to the ground from which you were created, for dust you are and dust you will return.”

Pointing his finger down the path leading out of the garden, he blasted them with the words, “Go! Leave my garden. Into the wilderness I send you to fend for yourselves!”

Before they departed, however, garments of beasts appeared on their bodies, fashioned by God. On Adam’s shoulder hung a sack of food and on Eve’s shoulders a skin filled with water. That was all they would take into the wilderness. Then once again God stretched out his arm. “Now go!” he thundered. That moment, as they looked back, he vanished, never to be seen on earth again. Adam and Eve now left their refuge: the first man and woman. After the Creator banished them from the Garden of Eden—Adam to work the ground and Eve to bear mankind, he installed angels with flaming swords to stand guard in Eden. Henceforth, it was closed to Adam and his descendants because of his sin; and yet, having failed God’s test, they fulfilled his plan. Through Adam’s seed and Eve’s womb, creation was completed. Because of her curiosity, Adam had fallen from grace, paradise was lost, and Satan had become the Tempter—the great adversary of God.

## Come Down Zacchaeus!

Zacchaeus looked expectantly at the man. There, silhouetted against the noonday sun, waited the first taxpayer to pay his fee. Somewhere, among the long line winding around his station and down Jericho's main street, he expected a complaint or challenge. His dagger hand twitched and back arched. He walked over and looked out his window to gauge the size of the line. But nowhere in this group were these reflexes justified. Today, not one voice was raised in protest as he began his work. An undercurrent was there, waiting for the cue. Looking out over the crowd, he could see it in both the idlers and those waiting to pay: that fierce desire for freedom and justice so typical of the Jews. Ever since the uprising, Galilee had been a hotbed of revolt, a place where no Gentile or publican was safe. But this was Jericho, not some desert village, and he didn't expect problems here.

Slowly, with the faintest tremor in his hands, he motioned for his first customer, who waited impatiently at the entrance, to approach, eyeing his assistants on each side of the table and the guards posted on each side of the door. After signaling nervously to his assistants, he motioned for the collection to begin. Since he was collecting new taxes, he expected idlers to be loitering outside his office, grumbling about the latest Roman abuse. These townsfolk were delaying paying their taxes. Many of them would wait until the deadline—that point when soldiers from the fortress would pay a visit to their homes.

Everyone living in Jericho was on his list; no one was exempt after he turned it in. As Unculus and Aramus gathered their money, he would cross off each resident's name only when he or she paid their fee. But there were always those idlers like the ones he saw now, who hoped to see dissension in the ranks. Too often there were one or two rowdies among them just waiting to set them off.

With trepidation, therefore, Zacchaeus walked momentarily away from his table. His assistants temporarily drew back. The line came suddenly to a halt. Looking carefully out his window now, ready to dodge a stone or rotten piece of fruit, he wondered why it was so especially quiet at such a time. Was this just a well-behaved crowd? He wondered.... *Or was their mischief afoot?*

A ripple went through the crowd as he peeked out, like a stone dropped into still water. Eyes flashed, heads slowly turned, until finally they focused upon someone in their midst. A commotion grew within the gathering of idlers and the line waiting at his door, as shadows stretched down the path. There came a tap-tap-tapping and rustle of gravel as two figures now emerged from the crowd: a young boy beside a spry, stately looking old man.

In the publican's eye came understanding and a measure of relief. This old man was obviously a man of authority here. If it was not for his presence, there might be trouble now. The publican knew the crowd was hostile about the latest tax, and the old man's reputation probably kept it at bay. With a subtle signal or facial gesture he could just as easily create dissension, though it seemed unlikely that the townsfolk would actually attack.

Zacchaeus now found himself looking up at his visitor. He was at least a head shorter than the old man. It was discomforting for him to have someone come so close, especially when he had to look up. It was as if the stranger knew him from somewhere and was about to make a scene. For a few moments after the old man and boy entered the room, the two men stood there

in silence appraising each other: publican and town elder. Though both were Jews, they represented two worlds and two lifestyles—as far apart as men could be.

Somewhere in his wanderings he was sure that they had clashed; he could see it in the old man's eyes and his faint but crafty smile. For his part, recognition came more slowly. Such busybodies, the keepers of public morality, included priests, rabbis, rich merchants, and Pharisees. Normally, they were no threat to him. He had found them everywhere in Palestine: in major cities, out-of-the-way towns, small villages, and often on the road, shaking their heads, clucking like chickens amongst themselves, blaming him behind his back for the latest dues, toll, or provincial tax.

The main difference between his present station and his outposts before was the sheer number paying taxes. There were a lot more clients in a city like Jericho. Compared to posts in Galilee, these Judeans were a peaceable lot, even though they were much too quiet. In Galilee they were stoning tax collectors on sight. These folks seemed to be waiting for just the right moment, perhaps until the old man arrived. Now that moment was here, and a low buzz of derision began in anticipation of what was in store. If he was lucky, there would not be a riot today and no one would be killed. Otherwise, if his instincts were wrong, he was in grave danger and the quiet he was receiving was merely a lull before a storm.

His small attachment of guards, which would have served him well in a small village, now seemed meager against this mob. Again he thought of his dagger. His hand twitched. But, given the size of the crowd outside, the impulse seemed ludicrous and, had the action been carried out, quite insane.

It seemed as if every idler in town had gathered for this event. He would just have time to kill this old fool before they tore him to shreds. If things got out of hand, the guards, he was quite sure, would drop their swords and run. Already, they were probably searching for an avenue of retreat. A similar situation occurred in Nain: a hellhole of brigands and vagabonds. At Nain, though, he had been given Roman guards. If a problem had arisen, they would have cut a path through this vermin, until they were safely on the road. His protection today, he reminded himself, were Syrian cutthroats, without an ounce of Roman blood. They barely knew what end of the sword to hold. Most of them, he was sure, would show their backsides after leaving him to the mob. How he ever thought he was safe under their protection seemed incredible now.

After coming forward a few paces to get a better look at the old man's face, he felt foolish. Backing slowly away into the shadows, trying not to show cowardice, he reached behind himself to make sure his assistants were still there. Sure enough, he could feel Unculus' garlic-ridden breath at the back of his neck and feel his hand holding the hilt of his sword. But, after looking askance both ways, he realized that Aramus was nowhere in sight.

"Where is he?" he growled under his breath. "He was just there a moment ago. Where did Aramus go?"

"He is behind me sir." Unculus whispered shakily. "We're no match for this mob! It's not like it was on the road. Now there's nowhere to escape!"

"Get up here beside me, you scurvy dogs!" the publican gnashed his teeth. "I expect this from those auxiliaries the Romans sent me, but I've paid you both good money!"

"Abner," the old man declared "this little fellow is our new publican. His name is Zacchaeus. I met him in Jerusalem many summers ago, collecting dues in front of the temple. Though he does this dirty work for his Roman masters, he's a Jew—the smallest one

I've ever seen. Milking his people of their hard earnings makes him feel important, like a big man, but, like a Greek merchant or Syrian money-lender, he's a slave to greed."

"Slave?" Abner smiled at Zacchaeus. "He doesn't look like a slave grandfather. But he is, like me, small for his age. He's wearing gold necklaces and rings. He has a big money box full of coins."

"The boy's right." The publican smiled at Abner. "I'm *not* a slave. I'm a free man: a Jew and a citizen of Rome. Unless you've come to pay your taxes, please remove yourselves from this room! Let me do my job!"

"All men are slaves," the old man continued, "but all slaves are not men. It is questionable if you are a man Zacchaeus; *you're much too small!* At least you are proud of what you are. Yet you are worst than a mere slave; you're a parasite! Even to the Romans, that is the *lowest form of life!*"

"Ah, I remember now." Zacchaeus gave him a crooked smile. "You're Ibrim Bar Samuel, that old scribe I met in Jerusalem! Fortunately for me, I was only an apprentice then. You gave my master a tongue-lashing! I remember the spittle flying out of your rabid mouth!" "Shame on you Ibrim!" he wagged his finger good-naturedly. "You create trouble *everywhere you go!*"

In the center of Zacchaeus' teeth as he spoke, Abner spotted a gold tooth. On each of the publican's earlobes there dangled gold baubles, which jingled as he moved. It reminded the boy of one of the desert nomad princes he had seen shopping in town. Clearly, this was the richest man Abner had ever seen, and yet he was defending himself against an old man who, after making poor investments all his life, barely had enough to buy himself a new pair of shoes.

Far from being repulsed by Zacchaeus' profession, Abner quietly admired the man's gold. The taxes they paid, he learned from his friend Sylvius, were raised just enough to give the collector a commission, which was his only pay. His father, who had been a good businessman, had taught him the value of riches, only to lose it all when he died. Grandfather's business sense, grandmother many times complained, had evaporated their funds. By following the strict guidelines of the Torah, he had let opportunities pass him by. By investing in the welfare of his people, he had deprived his family of their inheritance, which would force his grandson to start at the bottom where grandfather was now.

One of Grandfather's big investment, the local synagogue, which he thought would endear him to his neighbors, had brought him acclamation but not a mite for his own purse. Day by day, as their funds dwindled and grandfather invested in other unproductive projects, Abner watched the old man still struggling to earn a wage for them as a scribe while hoarding what little they had left, trying to convince him that men like Zacchaeus were wrong and he was right, even though Abner knew it was tax money that kept cities like Jericho alive.

As the old man lodged his complaint about the new civic tax, Zacchaeus, in the comic gesture of a mime, pulled out a parchment and wrote it down. Whenever Ibrim harassed Eusybius, the previous publican, the tax collector would grow livid with rage and demand that he leave. Zacchaeus was different than grandfather's other victims. Although his servants and guards were edgy, he kept his head. He was going to show these bumpkins who was in control.

While listening to a general attack on his office, Zacchaeus continued writing down his complaints with exaggerated strokes. Then, without saying another word, Ibrim pulled the boy out of Zacchaeus' office, as if it were suddenly unclean, and resumed a dignified gait outside through the crowd. Abner tried not to laugh as Ibrim began tapping his walking stick rhythmically on the cobblestones below. It was clear to him, however, that his grandfather was

upset. He had finally found a publican with a backbone and a sense of humor, who seemed proud of what he did.

What impressed Abner most of all, however, was the man's diminutive size. Zacchaeus was small, just like himself. In spite of his grandfather's imposing presence, the little publican had faced him down. During mere eye contact, he forged a link with the boy with the faintest of smiles. It was a look which told Abner that size was not the measure of a man.

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When they were a comfortable distance away from the crowd and strolling hand-in-hand down Jericho's main street, grandfather finally spoke.

"Abner!" he snapped. "Wake up boy, you act like you're in a daze!"

"Yes, grandfather." The boy looked up into his glowering face.

"Answer me honestly boy." His eyes narrowed to slits. "You admire that rogue, don't you?"

"No, grandfather," the boy lied, but it was as if grandfather had read his mind.

"I saw him smile at you. Don't try to deny it!" he said accusingly. "You kept staring at his money chest and the jewelry he wore!"

"I stare at many things," Abner said evasively. "I heard you tell him that he was a para..."

"Site, boy, *parasite!*" the old man tapped him gently with his cane. "I could've added that Zacchaeus is a traitor to his people. I should've said a lot more!"

"Yes," Abner nodded his head impishly "... and you also called him a slave."

"A figure of speech," grandfather continued to frown. "What I meant was that he was a captive of his own greed, like the drunk is on wine or the epicurean is on food."

"What is an epic-epic... curean?" Abner made a face.

"An epicurean is someone like your poor father who ate too much fine food," grandfather explained, unlocking the gate and ushering the boy in. "Our God gives us food to sustain our bodies and wine for our feasts; he doesn't want us to act like pigs. He also gives us enough so we can live comfortably, yet he doesn't want us to take advantage of our neighbors or friends, like Zacchaeus is doing now."

"Mother said father's heart gave out," Abner murmured to himself. "... My father was a *good* man!"

"Yes, he was a good man." Grandfather sighed wistfully as his wife greeted them by the door. "But his money did him no good!"

Abner had always listened to grandfather's wisdom in the past. The old man had taught him the Ten Commandments and the tradition of his people, at least as much as he could understand. But his hatred of wealth had never made sense to the boy. Many of his friends in school were from rich parents. Sylvius always had a fine lunch to eat between classes, and he always wore a new pair of shoes. His companion's parents, like father once did, ate the best meats and sauces and the finest cakes. Zacchaeus, he believed, was richer than them.... He even had gold in his teeth! And yet he was small, just like himself, *the smallest adult he had ever seen!*

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As Abner's family sat down for the noonday meal, the boy listened to grandfather utter "Here O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord!", break off chunks of bread, and pass them down the line.

After the Shema, staring at the piece in his hand, Abner heaved a broken sigh.

"I wish we had some butter," he blurted out now.

"We'll have butter at Shavuoth." His mother smiled sheepishly. "Grandmother is also going to make honey cakes with nuts."

"Wonderful!" Abner made a face, as he picked at his crust.

"Your son is an ingrate!" the old woman scolded, giving her daughter-in-law a disapproving look. "The Bedouin children live on olives and goat's cheese. The poor beggars in the street eat garbage and sometimes starve!"

"Abner remembers the feasts given by his father," she replied with melancholy. "The boy's friends taunt him with their rich foods."

"He should be thankful for what he has!" Grandmother said, gnawing at her own piece of bread.

But Abner wasn't thankful. Something had awakened in him today. He began wondering how many sweetmeats, cakes, and other delicacies he could buy with Zacchaeus' gold.

Perhaps due to their poverty, Grandmother was an unimaginative cook. Mother had always relied on servants, until father died. Unlike Sylvius' parents' meals, which included several kinds of breads, meats, sauces, varied fruits, and cakes, their meal now was simple and unchanging. The closest they came to eating meat was fish: fish for breakfast, fish at midday, and fish for supper too. Rarely did they eat lamb or fowl. When they ate bread, it was always the same flat, round, and course loaves eaten at supper, with the exception that there was less of it. Butter was scarce, except on special occasions and for holidays such as Shavuoth, and cheese was limited to the crude form Grandfather loved. There were no fine sauces, vegetables, or fruits, except the bitter and hard-to-eat pomegranates from grandfather's garden. There were no fine wines or fruit juices as in Sylvius' house either. What he had in his mug to drink was the same thing everyone else at the table was drinking: water from Grandfather's well. When the meal was over, Grandmother did not bring out sweetmeats or cakes as Sylvius' mother did, except on special occasions. She would shoo he and the old man away while she and mother cleaned up their mess.

He couldn't even snatch a piece of fruit when they weren't looking. There were no fig trees, berries, or grapes to pick freely as at Sylvius' house. Grandfather would occasionally pick him one of his awful pomegranates then expect him to peel it himself. What Abner would give for one ripe fig! What price would he pay to taste fresh honeycomb or a Lebanese pastry, instead of this burnt fish and moldy bread?

At Sylvius fine house, everyone sat around on silk cushions, listening to the sound of the fountain nearby. Servants would bring out course after course in the manner of the Romans. Occasionally, a musician would play something softly on a lute or even sing as they ate. Here in Grandfather's crowded little house, there was not a fountain or servants. The only sounds allowed at Grandmother's strict table were the sounds of slurping, munching, and a frequent belch.

The fine manners and lifestyle he admired at Sylvius' house, he realized, were purchased by money, not ancestry or tradition. Whereas Sylvius was what Grandfather called a Hellenized Jew, with little knowledge of his heritage or tribe, Grandfather as well as Abner belonged to the tribe of Judah, in which came kings and from which the messiah would be one day be born.

Grandfather was very proud of his tribe and his standing in town, but Abner was tired of being poor. When he thought about the publican, he felt ashamed for admiring his wealth. Yet Zacchaeus, who was a Jew like themselves, was far more wealthy than anyone they knew and he

wasn't ashamed. What demon had grabbed a hold of him to make him yearn for gold, instead of his people's tradition? Why did he, living as he did in grandfather's house and sitting at his table, suddenly want what his Grandparents considered forbidden: fine clothes, fine drink, and fine food?... Was it so wrong to want to be rich as they once were?

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That evening grandfather took Abner for their usual walk. In the past, the boy had enjoyed exploring Jericho's market district. Even though they couldn't buy what they saw, it gave him a chance to dream about what he once had. His father would often buy him the most expensive treat he could find. But grandfather, even when he still had some of father's money left, had always been stingy. On occasion, as this evening, he would take the boy to the bakery downtown and allow him to smell the aroma's filtering out of Yusef Bar Zadok's shop. Only once, during Abner's long captivity with his grandparents, did he buy him a roll.

This evening little Abner craved a pastry, even a cheap, unsweetened roll to make him feel as if his life was worth something. The summer recess for school was coming to an end; soon he would be walking that way with his friend Sylvius, so that he might occasionally mooch a meal off his parents before he got home. But he couldn't wait until then. Those additional weeks he must spend without those culinary delights seemed unbearable now.

"Grandfather!" he suddenly cried. "I know now how the beggars and Bedouin boys feel! *Please buy me a roll!*"

"Very well Abner." replied grandfather, stroking his long, white beard. "For all her goodness, your Grandmother is a terrible cook! This afternoon I shall buy us each a roll and a dip of honey to kill the taste of that fish!"

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Abner was surprised and delighted by his Grandfather's action. Tempering his thankfulness was the lecture the old man gave him about human greed. He had heard it before from the old man, a variation of which he heard today after their encounter with Zacchaeus, the publican. He could scarcely hear him this time, as he munched his sweet roll. As they walked back to Grandfather's house, the sun still sat high in the sky. The crowds were still thick on the main road, and were particularly dense in the square where Jericho's fountain and garden sat. Curious by this commotion, Grandfather looked down at Abner and scratched his beard.

"Let's go see what it is," he announced, giving Abner's hand a yank. "Zacchaeus' booth is down that way. I hope it's not another riot or incident."

"Why do men riot?" Abner wrinkled his nose. "What's an incident?"

"Desperate men do foolish things," Grandfather said cryptically.

Grandfather's answer was totally insufficient. Not wanting another long-winded lecture, however, Abner shrugged, chewing the last piece of his roll with relish. After a short distance, a woman scurried past them, a rapturous look on her face.

"He is a great prophet!" she cried breathlessly. "I must tell my husband and parents. He looked right at me, into my very soul!"

"What's she talking about?" mumbled Grandfather.

When they reached the building used by the publican, the door was shut. Zacchaeus had been looking out the window that moment. Withdrawing behind a curtain to avoid another encounter with the old man, he cursed his luck. He should be home now in his sumptuous estate instead of the tiny domicile assigned to him by the Romans. Now, in broad daylight, it seemed

to be too late. The Roman guards, who picked up his chest of coins (minus his share), had departed. Meanwhile, after collecting the taxes, the crowds had increased, rather than decreased. Something was afoot in town. During the wait, Unculus and Aramus, so typical of hired ruffians, slipped away like jackals, leaving him alone, with no protection. He felt especially vulnerable after collecting taxes and the spectacle made by that old man. Many of Jericho's citizens would recognize his face.... Now something was happening in Jericho. Was it another insurrection as he had seen in other towns? Had those troublesome Jews found another leader like Judas, the Galilean, to incite rebellion? Zacchaeus hoped this wasn't true. Considering the large Roman presence in Judea, such a revolt seemed like madness to him,... but then, he reminded himself, the Jews weren't like the Greeks, Romans, and Syrians. There were many hotheads like that old man, some far worse, who translated words into action.

In his current state of mind, the old man's voice outside jolted him. Though it sounded irrational, he expected several knocks after hearing his voice. Then he realized that he wasn't calling to him; he was talking to a woman in the street. Listening beside the window, his ears perked up when he heard the old man question her:

"You say this prophet speaks of a different kingdom—not of this world?"

"Yes," she answered excitedly, "I don't understand what he means, but he promised us if we believed we would not die but have everlasting life."

"Rubbish!" the old man scoffed. "Another wild man from the desert. The Roman authorities better not hear that!"

Clearly, the old man, a Pharisee, was ruffled by this news, and yet the boy accompanying him appeared to be in awe.

"Let's go hear the wild man, Grandfather." He jumped up and down.

"No, Abner." The old man shook his head. "I was foolish to suggest such a thing. I've seen enough prophets. Your head is filled with enough nonsense."

Hanging his head in despair, Abner was led home by his grandfather. Catching a glimpse of the publican in the window, he waved sadly and smiled. A strange urge filled Zacchaeus to find out who this man was. Was there a connection between the preacher in town and those rabble-rousers troubling Rome? He sensed something special about the preacher spoken of by the woman. Drawing his hood over his head, he slipped out quietly, and walked quickly toward the town square from which the noise appeared to emanate. Few people were heading in the opposite direction now. Everyone was traveling north to the town square. When he arrived behind the huge mass of listeners, he could hear the voice of the preacher, but he was too small to look above their unwashed heads. Moving around the crowd, he tried to wedge into the smelly Judean horde but found the taller men and women jealous of their vantage point. He was too frail to bully his way in. After being elbowed this way and that, Zacchaeus spotted the large sycamore towering over the square. Momentarily tempted to give up his effort to see the preacher and take this opportunity to go home, he stood there in a small clearing of bodies, looking up at the tree. The last time he climbed such a tree, he was a child in Alexandria, escaping punishment by his stepfather. Now, well passed his youth, he wondered if he could manage such a feat. Drawn to the ancient trunk, he noticed a knurl half way up to the first major limb, placed a foot on the knurl, and then climbed up carefully, until he could grab a branch. For an instant he almost lost balance and tumbled onto the ground, but, as he slammed back onto the trunk, by sheer will, he reached up far enough to grab the branch. Scratched and bleeding, he cursed his folly, as he pulled himself toward the limb. The ragged bark allowed him just enough footage to reach his destination. Straddling the limb, he was rewarded with a perfect view of the

preacher who stood on a flat stone—a remnant of the ancient wall destroyed by Joshua, his voice loud and resonant.

Unseen, Zacchaeus had heard the man preaching. Words such as Kingdom of God, salvation, and paradise were illogical abstractions to his publican mind. That very moment, though, as Zacchaeus cupped his ear to hear, a Pharisee from the crowd, similar in sound to the old man he had encountered earlier today, stepped forth and asked him a soul-jarring question: “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Even at a distance, it appeared to Zacchaeus that the preacher was being tested. There had been sarcasm in the Pharisee’s voice. The man turned to the speaker, pausing only a moment as he thought of a reply.

“In our scriptures,” he asked the Pharisee, “what is the essence of our belief. Though a man of the law, how would you read this?”

“Do not sin. Obey the commandments,” the Pharisee answered quickly.

“Wrong.” The preacher shook his head.

“Love God and shun evil,” the Pharisee tried again.

“Wrong again.” The preacher laughed softly.

“Your question is too general,” complained the Pharisee. “I could recite our laws and traditions. I have even remembered scriptures word for word. Teacher, what exactly do you mean? What does this have to do with eternal life?”

The preacher’s voice had a note of irritation. “It has everything to do with it. Look around at your people, whom you serve. Think about your loved ones. What are your feelings toward God? Your thoughts are lost in the law. One word escapes you. The answer is written in your heart, not in the law.”

The audience, which had been mumbling amongst themselves, became deathly silent, as the Pharisee responded. His cynical tone had vanished entirely. “I remember now,” his voice was filled with emotion. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind.”

“And what else?” the preacher shot back. “What is the second half?”

Without hesitation, the Pharisee declared, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus said with great conviction. “Do this and you will have eternal life!”

The Pharisee stepped back, with bowed head as if in thought. In his place, Zacchaeus recognized by his clothes, a scribe, who asked in a mocking tone, “Who is my neighbor? We have many races in Jericho: Jews, Greeks, Syrians, Egyptians, and Romans.”

“All men and women are your neighbors,” the preacher explained, looking out at the crowd. “All people are children of God.”

That very moment, after that statement, which caused a collective gasp, he seemed to look over the heads of the listeners directly at Zacchaeus. Instead of preaching again, he told the crowd a story that stirred Zacchaeus deeply.

“Verily I say unto you.” He raised three fingers. “A man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him, and then went away, thinking he was dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. And yet a Samaritan, whom the Jews considered unclean, happened to be traveling that way, arriving at the location where the man was. Unlike the priest and Levite, who, like the victim, were Jews, the Samaritan took pity upon him when he saw him. He went immediately to him, bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the

man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and left him in the care of the innkeeper. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Continue to look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’”

Turning to the scribe now, he asked, “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The scribe remained silent, pondering the meaning of his story but said nothing. The Pharisee, however, looked up and said, in a husky voice, “The one who showed mercy to him.”

Reaching out to grip his shoulders, the preacher replied in a loud voice, “Go and do likewise!”

Zacchaeus sat on his limb, staring with illumination at the preacher. As his blue eyes flashed in the sunlight, it was as if the preacher had spoken those last words to him. What made it directly and suddenly personal was when the preacher moved through the crowd toward his tree, and stopping beneath its alms, called up in a loud voice, “Zacchaeus, come down!”

“Teacher.” Zacchaeus broke into tears. “I am a sinner—a publican. What do you want of me?”

“You are rich man, Zacchaeus,” he said, raising his arms as though he might just pluck him from his precarious position. “The Spirit of the Lord brought you here. My disciples are weary. I am weary. Would you give us supper tonight?”

“Yes, teacher, I am honored,” he sputtered. “My house is your house. I am your servant. I shall run home, alert my cook, and make you a fine feast!”

At this point, many people in the audience were scandalized. The very thought that a Jew, let alone a religious teacher, would eat in the house of a tax collector caused them to grumble and shake their heads. Zacchaeus knew very well what this meant, but it didn’t matter to him. The Pharisee and scribe had disappeared into the crowd, but there were many other men in religious raiment, including priests, and other Pharisees and scribes, who pushed forward to protest and shake their fists.

“He’s supposed to be a righteous man, and yet he will be the guest of a sinner,” cried a Sadducee.

“This man isn’t righteous,” a portly Pharisee shouted. “He consorts with Zacchaeus, a bloodsucking tax collector—an agent of Rome!”

“All people are sinners,” the teacher began preaching again. “All fall short as Adam. They who reject the Samaritan, are not righteous. No one is saved by the law!”

This last insult to the old order rankled the Pharisees, scribes, and priests the most. Zacchaeus was now fearful of leaving the safety of his tree. Who was this stranger, who challenged the law of the Jews? In the accusation against him, the Pharisee had mentioned Zacchaeus personally. Would they stone the teacher? Would they also stone him? What followed impressed him almost as much as the story about the Good Samaritan.

“You challenge our laws,” the Pharisees cried out in a wounded voice. “All of you heard it; he claims that no one is saved by the law. That’s heresy and blasphemy. You arrive off the desert with your unwashed band as if you are a prophet and great teacher. No prophet of our faith would say such a thing!”

Several other men shouted similar charges. One man, Zacchaeus identified as a priest, even tore his raiment and shook his fists. Zacchaeus counted twelve men standing closest to the preacher, whom he thought might be his followers—all of them were as frightened as himself. Most people in the crowd appeared to be simple folk, both men and women and a few children. After observing the classes of taxpayers arriving at his booth, Zacchaeus knew that

there was no love between those pompous doctors of the law and priests and the common folk. Clearly by their expressions, the preacher had struck a chord with those common folk. He hadn't attacked their faith, only their rigid laws, which Zacchaeus found tedious.

Rising above the dissenters in the crowd, the preacher's deep, resonant voice drowned out the loudest critic.

"I haven't come to abolish the law or the Prophets," he argued. "I've come to fulfill them. Until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commandments will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

When he paused, the publican realized his first words had been aimed at the highborn and educated. Taking this opportunity, a scribe called out spitefully, "You can't fool us, teacher. Your honeyed words belie your intent to corrupt these good people. Who are you to speak for God?"

Then, ignoring the last outburst, Jesus turned to the crowds, taking in the common folk and his disciples at glance. "You heard him," he uttered a sour laugh. "The scribes, priests, and Pharisees are the official interpreters of the law of Moses. So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don't follow their example. For they don't practice what they teach. They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden. Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with scripture verses inside, and they wear robes with extra long tassels. And they love to sit at the head of tables at banquets and in the seats of honor in the synagogues. They love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces, and to be called priest or rabbi. But don't call anyone rabbi. You have only one teacher, and all of you are equal as brothers and sisters. Don't address anyone here on earth as 'father,' for only God in heaven is your spiritual father. And don't let anyone call you 'teacher,' for you have only one teacher, the Messiah. The greatest among you must be a servant. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

"What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees? Hypocrites! For you shut the door of the Kingdom of Heaven in people's faces. You won't go in yourselves, and you don't let others enter either. What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees? Hypocrites! For you cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn that person into twice the child of hell you yourselves are!

"What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees? Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things. Blind guides! You strain your water so you won't accidentally swallow a gnat, and yet you swallow a camel!

"What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees? Hypocrites! For you are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence! You blind Pharisee! First wash the inside of the cup and the dish, and then the outside will become clean, too.

"What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees? Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead

people's bones and all sorts of impurity. Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness.

"What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees? Hypocrites! For you build tombs for the prophets your ancestors killed, and you decorate the monuments of the godly people your ancestors destroyed. Then you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would never have joined them in killing the prophets.'

"But in saying that, you testify against yourselves that you are indeed the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Go ahead and finish what your ancestors started. Snakes! Sons of vipers! How will you escape the judgment of hell?"

On that note, the crowd broke into cheers. The object of his scorn—the Pharisees, scribes, and priests—were beside themselves with rage, but they were greatly outnumbered.

"I agree with this man," an old woman shouted. "He is indeed a prophet."

"Yes," a young man shouted, "and he's one of us!"

The preacher's last words were aimed at one particularly nasty Pharisee. Zacchaeus could barely see him as the townsfolk surrounded him. Until he finished his sermon, the publican felt trapped on the tree. Somehow, after the preacher was finished, he would obey his command and come down from the tree, but for now he would take no chances. A tingling up his spine and lightness overtaking his head told him his tax-paying days had ended in this town. Every word the holy man had said had made an impact on his mind. Finally, as the crowd dispersed, two of the men who stood next to the preacher approached the tree.

"Zacchaeus," a tall, swarthy fellow with a graying beard, called up to him. "I am Peter, a disciple of Jesus." "This is Andrew, my brother," he pointed to the smaller man. Let us give you a hand climbing down from the tree."

Lowering himself down, clutching a branch, trembling with expectation and fatigue, Zacchaeus stepped down upon Peter's shoulders, and then found his small frame cradled in the arms of Andrew, who spoke gently to him, as if he was a child: "Come, join us. We're on our way to Jerusalem. Don't be afraid, Zacchaeus, we were all frightened once. Jesus is guarded by the Most High...He's the Messiah and Son of God!"

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That evening in the home of Zacchaeus, Jesus and his twelve disciples sat around a sumptuous table of lamb, lentils, savory soup, and sweet meats. Looking around the table after the Shema had been spoken and the food blessed, Jesus focused upon his host, speaking to all: "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, Zacchaeus, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Zacchaeus knew his life would never be the same, and yet he didn't know what to make of this strange man. How could any mortal be the Jewish Messiah, let alone the Son of God? Who was the Son of Man? Was Jesus a prophet...or a new god? As the preacher and his disciples slept in his house, he walked into his garden and stared up to the sky, wondering where Jesus would lead him now. He was certain of only one thing: he must follow this holy man. His voice had been a balm to his troubled mind. It gave him peace and an inexplicable sense of purpose. The prefect would have to find someone else to fleece the Judeans, he decided. In the morning he would inform Glaucus, the local centurion, and dismiss his guards. He would bring a bag of gold with him to give to the disciples and the poor. This would please the preacher, and help make up for all those years he served Rome.

In the morning, as his guests rested up and Jesus chatted with a friendly delegation of townsmen, Zacchaeus excused himself quietly and left to take care of his affairs. The prefect was quite upset with his decision to quit his post. Zacchaeus, who was not a convert yet, told him that he must leave Jericho and return to Alexandria to care for his ailing mother. It was, of course, an outright lie, but he wouldn't dare tell the prefect the truth. Retreating from the garrison, he ran back up the Jericho road into town until he reached the office of the publican, where he left a written note to his guards, weighted down with a small bag of denarii. Satisfied with himself, he looked back once more at his office, at the long, checkered road leading to his post, shut the door for the last time, and began walking back to his house. That moment, he heard a small, high-pitched voice, and turned to see Abner staring up at him.

"My grandfather said you are a bloodsucking lackey of Rome," he said calmly. "Is that true?"

"Where is the old fellow?" Zacchaeus looked around self-consciously. "You shouldn't be by yourself, Abner. The streets aren't safe for children. Does he know where you are?"

"Grandfather is visiting the rabbi," he spoke rapidly. "Uzziah is sick. Grandmother brought the rabbi some soup."

"So you snuck away, eh?" Zacchaeus chortled, scuffing his hair.

Glancing at Zacchaeus' satchel, containing his writing materials, Abner's eyebrows shot up. "Are you going on a trip?"

"No, I'm going home." He sighed wistfully. "I have guests: a great teacher and his disciples. I might just join up."

"Is it that a her-a-tic?" Abner struggled with the word.

"He's not a heretic." Zacchaeus frowned. "Who told you that, Abner—your grandfather?"

"Uh huh, he said he is a blast-feemer, too."

"Do you even know what those words means?"

"No," the boy replied thoughtfully, "but they must be bad."

"Your grandfather's wrong," the publican said with great conviction. "The teacher's a great man. I've never heard anyone like him. When he spoke, it was as if he was talking directly to me. Then he came to me as I sat in the tree and called my name. It was as if scales fell from my eyes. I know now what I must do. My life will never be the same!"

"Can I meet him?" Abner looked up expectantly. "Grandfather wouldn't let us hear him. He thinks he's a bad man."

"Listen to me Abner," Zacchaeus embraced his shoulders. "My house is considered impure to men like your grandfather. I would need his blessing to take you there. It would get you into trouble. Go back to your grandfather. Tell him nothing of this."

"Nothing?" Abner looked up dejectedly.

"Not a word," he wagged a finger. "Jesus was talking to his kind yesterday. Your grandfather is close-minded and won't understand." "... But don't worry," he added, gazing into space. "I have a feeling he's a great prophet. You're going to hear more about this man!"

With a downcast look, Abner stood there looking down the road from which he had heard the commotion the previous day. "What is his name?"

"His name is Jesus," Zacchaeus answered, taking his hand. "He comes from a small town, I scarcely heard of: Nazareth." "Come on Abner." He pulled him along gently. "I won't let you return to your grandfather alone. Someday, I'll come back and tell you everything I know about Jesus. All I know now is that he's changed my life.... I'll no longer collect taxes and serve

Rome. I'll serve Jesus. How I'll do this, I don't know. Jesus has attracted fisherman, servants, a tax collector like myself, and even a scribe. I've met his disciples. They range in age from a mere youth, like John, to an old man, called Bartholomew. Peter, the chief disciple, told me that there are even women and many more men among his followers. I'll fit in with them quite well.... Maybe someday, Abner, you can follow Jesus, too!"

As they approached the Rabbi's house, no one seemed the wiser. Abner looked up at Zacchaeus one more time, mumbled goodbye, and ran into the house. Zacchaeus then retraced his steps up Jericho's main road to begin a new life as a follower of Jesus. Unsure where His path would lead him, his mind overflowed with questions, and yet he was filled with inexplicable certainty that Jesus was more than just a teacher or even a prophet.... He was introducing to the world a new religion, so different from the harsh religion of his people. He might very well be the one his people had been waiting for.... *the Messiah!*

## The Devil's Debut

Marie Roget stood gazing into the bathroom mirror. It was the only piece of furniture not looted or vandalized in the condemned hotel. The auburn haired, infantile-faced adolescent looking out of from the glass was, she reflected, pure fiction. The only part of Marie's anatomy shown in the mirror that remained unchanged from the fiend of hell, where her dark eyes—the same black orbs that had beguiled politicians, tycoons, and kings and had once mocked Christ.

Ironically, those same beacons that so often gave her away were the only parts of her amorphous body she could not change. Marie was tempted to conjure up a pair of colored contacts to hide her terrible stare. She wasn't certain how she should actually present herself to the world. Her plain brown dress had seemed appropriate enough, but she needed a fashionable wardrobe now. What bubbled inside her—the greatest malevolent force ever brewed—could scarcely be contained, as she studied herself in the mirror. For one brief moment, her eyes flashed red with energy. Her skin radiated an ethereal light. The effect lasted during the sudden burst of thoughts racing through her mind, dissipating as she looked beyond herself into the glass.

A notion, born of impatience and ambition, gripped her as she stared into the mirror. In the quiet of the room Marie Roget's infernal heart hammered hard in her delicate ribcage. Perspiration gathered on her infantile brow. After turning from her reflection, she paced around the room a moment as would a feline trapped in a cage. Drawn to the door handle, she opened the door finally and slipped down the hall. The sound of snoring in each room was interspersed with snorts and fitful groans, reminding her that she was among alcoholics, drug addicts, and the lowest riff-raff from the street. After she left her temporary refuge, a notion filled her head.

In the hollows of Skid Row, it seemed no one knew Satan was afoot. What if, she dared ask herself, she gave them—the mainstream—a small inkling of things to come. *What fun that would be?* She thrilled at the thought. The compulsion swelled in Marie Roget's inscrutable mind. Walking softly down the rickety staircase, she drew her robe against her bare skin until passing through the ramshackle lobby and emerging on the street.

As a few wary tramps, who were shuffling up and down the boulevard, looked on, Marie was tempted to throw her robe aside and scamper naked down the boulevard, leaping gazelle like, humming a Wagnerian aria, as she began her official debut. Instead, she paused in silence to reflect on her mission, drawing her robe more tightly around her shivering frame. This was Skid Row.... Who but a handful of lecherous tramps would find a naked woman bereft of her senses significant? In spite of her attempts at being discreet, she had been tempted to give them a show.... But not this way. She must have a logical plan.

Common sense returned momentarily to Marie Roget. She began jogging back to the condemned hotel. It was not time, she reminded herself. She must not compromise her goals with melodrama. There would be plenty of time for theatrics later on the world stage. More importantly for Marie, was the unspeakable danger she would not admit to: the prophecies.

It was not merely John the Revelator and the Apostles who prophesized her return. Did not Jesus, himself, promise signs and portents in the Latter Days? Marie had no intentions of playing to a Biblical script, which was one reason why she chose her present form: a young woman. She must not portray the Scarlet Woman of the Harlot Church, which scampering naked

down the street, might convey. She must in the future avoid all indications of geographical and political boundaries of the one world government and church forecasted by prophets and apostles of the Judeo-Christian faiths. Everything she did from now on must be totally the opposite from doomsday forecasts. Without those outdated prophecies, there could be no end times chronology. She would be writing the script!

As she stood under the marquee, however, her natural theatrical impulse seemed stronger than her common sense. If she's going to debut, she reasoned, it must be subtle, unique, and be shown to only a select few. What would be the harm? Looking up into the morning sky, an idea and rationale took hold that made sound sense to her.

"I came up through the bowels of the earth," she exclaimed in a girlish voice. "That's what everyone expects. So I'll make my debut in the clouds, appearing in the morning sky!"

Marie's alter ego replied quickly "This is madness. How can you be subtle with such a grand scheme?" But it was too late, the transformation of her amorphous body had already begun. Her robe fell onto the sidewalk as if she had suddenly disappeared. For a moment, as she hovered excitedly down the boulevard, she created a ghostly imprint on the surrounding scene. She appeared as smog and moved as engine exhaust, causing eye irritation, offending noses and, at several points, startling drivers half out of their wits. Yet she remained just outside of visual range and never once made a sound.

Soaring high into the sky, changing through various will-o' the-wisp forms into something that would be apparent that to Abaddon, the gate keeper's eyes, Satan again reinvented herself over a range of evolutionary themes. As a primordial mist, blown by the wind, she remained airborne awhile. After transforming into a translucent Precambrian glob, her body took on gradual pigmentation and design. Her primitive blob-like shape became a fish swimming through the air, then a tadpole, salamander, and flying reptile with a great wingspan and a monstrous beak. Flying experimentally a moment, then rising majestically in the sky, she disappeared prudently into the clouds.

When she had broken through the other side, Lucifer had been reborn, rising up, as would the Phoenix, amid fire and smoke, flapping her devilish wings and rolling her cat-like eyes. As the stereotype devil of hell, this creature signaled to Abaddon, now looking up through the Porthole of Man, her reign on earth. And yet, it was witnessed by only a small audience on the topside of the clouds, beyond the view of earth. Not a soul had seen her yet, except the gate keeper of Hell and the passengers, flight crew, and attendants aboard Flight 127 from Paris France.

While this indicated satanic power, it also signaled her war with God. Although it was a new beginning, Abaddon, who sat now on the Throne of Hell, wondered if it might not just be the beginning of the end of Satan or God. He was not sure....Nor was Mare Roget, whose foolish impulse had shown her hand.

A great dread filled the serpent as he sat on the Throne of Hell. This was not a game or exercise to while away infernal time. Where the master had been content with the status quo before, she now had a grand plan in mind. Where her minions on earth had harvested most of the souls, she would take charge up there in a way never dreamed of before. Where she had frequently appeared topside to tempt a random soul, she now had the entire earth in mind, and she would not come back down until she had won the war... or lost.

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For the flight personnel and some of the passengers aboard Flight 127 to Los Angeles, the miracle filtered through both human skepticism and atmospheric conditions. Of the few on the sunlit side of the plane witnessing this bizarre formation, not all of them had seen it clearly and/or long enough to venture an opinion. It had been several hundred feet away from the plane when it surfaced and it lasted for only a few moments before sinking back into the clouds. The brightness of the sun shining on the plane as well as the rapid movements of the mirage also distracted from the show. Nevertheless, a chosen few aboard Flight 127, would become the first to witness Satan's debut.

Among those who would later come forth as witnesses to this event were the captain, himself, his copilot, two stewardesses, and two Roman Catholic clerics, who would take snapshots and capture the event they hoped would turn out on their digital camera and camcorder.

As the pilot gave his *before landing* speech, he found his attention quickly drawn to the apparition ahead, but it registered slowly in his skeptical mind.

"This is your captain speaking," he began cheerily. "We are now in a flight path for LAX. We should be landing shortly and breaking through this lovely mantle of clouds. For those of you who have never seen the city's smog, 'no there hasn't been a nuclear exchange.' According to the tower, it's only a second stage alert and rather pleasant for this time of year. The tower has cleared Flight 127 to land. Many years ago, pilots would have to tell passengers to douse their cigarettes. Now I must ask you to douse your cell phones and laptops, since this interferes with communications. Please fasten your seat belts and please remain seated and secured in your seats until we land. Thank you for flying Allied Air!"

"Fasten your safety belts," Flight attendant Sondra Largo reminded the clerics preoccupied with the view.

"Please remain seated," Ashley Dumas, her co-worker told them, as they began fumbling with the camera in the young priests hands.

"This is your captain again," the pilot's voice returned suddenly. "I've just sighted an interesting cloud formation directly to my left. Some of you may already have noticed. It looks sort of like the devil, although my copilot sees old Neptune surfacing from the sea. For those of you on the sunlit side it should already be visible as we continue our turn."

A science fiction and UFO buff, herself, Sondra's dark eyes flashed with excitement as she took the window side and strapped herself in.

"Look, Ashley, it does look like the devil." She pointed out of the porthole.

"It looks like a cloud to me," Ashley replied indifferently.

In truth, though, Ashley's green eyes had grown slightly myopic since attending night school this year. Without her new glasses, which were still in her purse, the apparition in the clouds might just as well have been the Pillsbury Dough Boy. As she pulled her spectacles finally out and placed them on her freckled nose, she was able to see just enough of the apparition to cause her to gasp.

As the plane began a wide arc, the apparition came closer and closer, but then began disappearing below the clouds. It had lasted, the priest clocked it with his watch, only three and one-half minutes.

"What do you suppose that was?" Ashley asked her friend.

"I'm not sure," Sondra replied breathlessly, her small nose pressed against the glass, "but it was not a UFO!"

“It’s a sign from God!” the young nun looked back from her seat. “Father Dominick and I’ve taken pictures of it to show our bishop and maybe the *Pope!*”

“It’s him, the *devil!* It’s beginning right before our eyes!” Father Dominick now responded, his gaze transfixed on the sight. “I’ve seen the dragon!” he whispered to himself. “... Where now is the *beast?*”

In his mind now, the priest remembered the passage from the Book of Revelations that introduced this event. For the first time in his long, uneventful career as a priest, he felt the breath of God at his neck and knew what his mission was on earth.

*Rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them. Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has only a short time.*

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After its prelude, Satan sank through the clouds, descending as a malevolent vapor down to earth. For one brief moment, captured in the minds of several onlookers below, the vapor was visible, appearing to many eyewitnesses as a small tornado or, more simply, as an ominous mist that disappeared completely several hundred feet in the air.

As Father Dominick La Farge and Sister Monique Clausin exited Flight 127, they could hear the excited murmurs of passengers and flight attendants who had seen the formation in the clouds. Father Dominick, always impulsive with his religious fervor, had decided, against the good sister’s advice, to talk to some of the eyewitnesses before heading back to Saint Catherine’s Roman Catholic church in town. He wanted to bolster his documented evidence and he and Monique’s account with like-minded opinions of this event.

Most of his short question and answer interviews occurred during the several moments that the passengers disembarked from the plane into the terminal. Using the small recorder in his coat, he captured their acknowledgements and brief comments on tape. Bowing to the nun’s wishes, he promised to limit his inquisitiveness from the flight crew to only the two flight attendants they met on the plane. This would round off his list of eyewitnesses when he played the tape for the bishop that day. Captured on both the digital camera and camcorder slung around his neck, he believed, was the greatest evidence of all: graphic proof of the dragon, which was forever imprinted in the priest’s crowded mind.

His articulate and excellent English, with only a hint of a French accent struck the two airline stewardesses, Sondra Largo and Ashley Dumas, as amusing, but caused an eyebrow to raise faintly on the nun’s haggard face. Monique knew how foolish this all sounded to anyone else who had not seen the cloud formation. A few of the exiting passengers had snickered at the “deranged priest.” She was not certain that the flight attendants, themselves, would not make fun of Dominick too. The sound of his tiny cassette recorder was barely audible as he engaged the women on the gangplank entering the terminal. A look of determination, often interpreted as fanaticism, now glowed in his piercing dark eyes.

The long journey from Paris’s noisy and crowded airport had seemed to take its toll on Sister Monique Clausen, and yet she managed to straighten her habit and spruce herself up in the tiny restroom offered in the plane. Not so for the dedicated, fact-gathering priest. His priestly garb looked as if he had slept in it, which in fact he had. His hair, always mussed, stuck out in all directions and his shoes had not been polished in months. Monique’s only desire was to retreat into her quarters at the rectory, however simple, shower, eat a simple meal and sleep until

noon tomorrow. The good father, who was already worn-out from his sleepless energy, would simply crash somewhere, perhaps at the rectory on the nearest couch. In his present frame of mind, he had no desire for sleep or even proper sustenance. She had never seen him so utterly driven before nor so bereft of his common sense.

As he eyed their nametags carefully, he at first struck the stewardesses as quizzical and eccentric. Monique had experienced the priest's impulsiveness before but had never gotten used to the momentary difficulties it caused them. So far in their short careers together it appeared as if the Lord watched over and even approved of the priest's recklessness. Today, this hour, she sensed, with a feeling of uneasiness, that he was about to launch them on his greatest spiritual detour.

"Pardon me mademoiselles Largo and Dumas," he called out to the stewardesses as they continued on their way, "what did you think of this phenomenon outside the plane? Was that not one for the books, eh?"

Monique cringed.

"Well," Sondra said with a titter, "at first I thought it might be a close encounter of some sort, but now I think it's sort of a religious thing."

"Sort of a religious thing, eh?" Dominick said cagily. "Yes-yes mon amé that is what sister Monique and I believe."

"Really? So, we weren't hallucinating." Ashley giggled foolishly, her exhaustion displaying itself in an expansive yawn. "Just what was that supposed to be out there Padre—the devil?"

"Ah, ouí, mademoiselle," he nodded reflectively, "but padre is Spanish, is it not? I am French-American. Your name, Dumas, is *French too*, is it not? Are you from this city?"

The question seemed irrelevant to the women, but Sister Monique, who wanted no part of this conversation, understood perfectly well. The priest wanted to know whether or not these two bimbos were locals in case he wanted to talk to them again.

"French-Canadian," Ashley corrected the beaming Dominick gently, "but I was born in Garden Grove."

"Garden Grove?" he murmured, rolling the unfamiliar name over and over in this mouth. "Garden Grove, Garden Grove...Where is this Garden Grove?"

"Orange County." Ashley looked at him in disbelief.

As if that just explained everything, the stewardess looked dully into space, but Sondra studied the pushy priest as he went on with what really interested him now.

"So, you both saw the dragon?" his heart quickened. "You truly saw it in the clouds!"

"Oh, it wasn't a dragon," Sondra frowned thoughtfully. "I think Ashley was right. It definitely had horns like a devil. When I heard the captain announce it, I was hoping it might be a UFO."

"I think I understand." It was his turn to frown thoughtfully. "You are—how do they say it?—a science fiction buff. Is this not correct mademoiselle?"

"Yes, I guess so," Sondra was growing irritated now. "This is all very interesting father, what did you say your name was?"

"Very interesting, indeed," he persisted, his eyes moving abstractedly to her nametag. "You, like many of your countrymen, prefer a scientific explanation when confronted with the unknown. But this is not science fiction mademoiselle Largo. Your name—Largo—sounds Latin too, eh? Are you perhaps a Catholic?"

"Italian-American," she said flatly, "born a Catholic. I'm not sure *what* I am now."

“You belong to the true church my daughter,” he spoke now as a priest.

At this point, with the two stewardesses’ verifications on the tape recorder in his pocket, he realized he had intruded enough. They had all seen a cloud formation that looked like Satan. What more could one say?

“Please call my cell phone,” he quickly passed his business card to each one of them, “if you wish to talk more about this matter. I know you are both tired as sister Monique and myself. With Sister Monique’s help, I plan on investigating this event. I believe that we were all blessed in seeing the dragon. I am certain that we live in momentous times,... perhaps the last days.”

On that ominous note, he and Sister Monique bid the two stewardesses adieu and, elbowing their way through the press of people, made their way to the baggage counter. The stewardesses walked at a much slower rate as the rush of disembarking passengers passed them by.

“The last days? What did he mean by that Ashley?” Sondra’s dark eyes seemed troubled now. “... I’ve heard my boyfriend mention those words, but Brad’s parents are Bible-thumping Protestants. I’ve never heard a priest talk like that before!”

“I don’t know anything about religion.” Ashley yawned widely again. “But that man gave me the creeps! He was too pushy. I think he was taping us too. The nerve of that guy!”

“Perhaps he was a little pushy,” Sondra replied, watching the priest and nun disappear completely in the crowd. “... But I have this strange feeling we’ll see that man again!”

It was as if a drumbeat had begun in Sondra’s head; suddenly, inexplicably she sensed that her life would never be the same.

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Straight ahead as they hunted for the baggage counter, Dominick could see a newsman interviewing travelers waiting in line. Next to the shorter man, stood a tall, handsome black man panning his camera up and down the line.

“Don’t even think of it, father,” Monique spoke quickly in French.

“C’est bon” Dominick cried, heading directly for the men.

“This is not a good idea,” she muttered with concern.

“Excuse me please,” he motioned to the chubby, balding reporter holding a mike. “I have a much better story for you right here!” He pointed to his carrying case.

“Father, we’re doing a report for On-the-Spot News,” Waldo Stubbs, the reporter explained dully. “But if you have some scenic tape to show us, mail it to the station. We’re quite busy now!”

“It is about the dragon in the sky,” Dominick blurted quickly as the reporter turned away. “Surely, you’ve heard passengers talking about this on their way out.”

“No, I haven’t,” replied the reporter, folding his arms and tapping his remote microphone abstractedly on his arm. “All I’ve heard is a lot of bellyaching about airport security delays and congestion.” “You know anything about anything about dragons, Cole?” he turned to his partner now. “Did I miss something somewhere?”

“Matter of fact, Stubby, you did,” his cameraman said, letting the camera dangle in its sling. “I heard a bunch of them who just come out thatta-way.” He pointed to the disembarkation point they had just exited.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Waldo asked with a flicker of irritation. “Anything would be better than *this*.” “So, you took some video shots.” He looked at Dominick with mounting interest in his eyes.

“Please, Father Dominick, this will not sit well with the bishop,” Monique begged.

“She’s right, she’s always right.” The priest tapped his carrying case longingly. “This is too public and circus-like. I don’t want this to be another human-interest feature on the news.”

“All right, fine.” Waldo shrugged lightly. “We’ll look at your tape.”

Dominick looked at his proffered hand in horror. Monique was shaking her head emphatically and motioning for him to move on. Doing the next best thing now, he did what he had done for the stewardesses and handed him his card, with his cell phone number but this time he jotted the address of the rectory hastily on its back. With little more fanfare, Waldo thanked him briefly and turned back to his interviews with the passengers in line. Dominick bowed politely to the newsmen and retreated in step with the nun.

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After locating their luggage on the conveyer belt, they hailed the first porter in sight. The priest and nun followed the porter with their many suitcases and parcels to the pickup zone outside the main entrance of the terminal, exhaustion plainly evident on their haggard faces. In spite of his fatigue, Sister Monique could see a familiar radiance in the priest’s face, magnified many times this day by dragon in the sky.

“That was potentially very stupid!” she scolded him now.

“Perhaps,” he sighed wistfully, “but the fact is I want the world to know!”

“Father, you don’t have to convince me of this miracle,” she argued with him gently, as he waved impatiently at the nearest cab. “The bishop is quite another matter, however. He may not be interested in your diversion. He would be furious if he saw this story on the news. He’s a tired old man. He will be interested in our notes from the Paris Convocation, that is all. Wait and show this first to the monsignor before giving it to the world.”

“That convocation was a waste of time and church business.” He made a disparaging gesture with his hand. “All these arguments about whether or not the church should condone certain forms of capital punishment and all those other tired social issues are decided in most countries by the division of church and state. Frankly, I didn’t agree with our last president’s lackluster response to war on terrorism and our narrow-minded approach to church unity. I agree with that President Trump fellow. On the subject of ecumenism, I like diversity. Have you forgotten that my brother is a Pentecostal missionary, Monique? But these issues dodge the greater issue that the church *can* control: men’s souls, which is more important than dogma. Dear Blessed Mary, we both just saw the onslaught of the dragon. Others did too. I’m a priest, Sister Monique. It’s about time I act like one, instead of a Vatican scribe!”

“You chose this path, father, we both did,” she sighed, flicking her habit out of her face. “What greater way to have an effect on the world than travel it? You would not be able to do that stuck in a parish in some backwoods town.”

“I’m not talking about a parish,” he found himself struggling with an idea. “... I will need to convince those myopic princes of the faith that our church should be at the forefront of bringing about this message. I don’t want to be stuck in one place, but neither do I want to waste time at anymore doctrinal conferences or convocations on church matters.”

As Dominick assisted the porter placing their luggage into the cab, the priest and nun continued to argue about the logic of pressing the point at this particular time. The porter's dark face broke into a wide grin as he listened to the two clerics' dispute.

Father Dominick clung stubbornly to what he felt was his new mission from God but realized that Sister Monique was only concerned about him getting into trouble again. Last summer, when he and the good sister were attending a synod on ecumenism in London, Dominick took a British Episcopal priest to task for his support of gay ordination and female clerics and was rebuked by Monsignor Carpel, a liberal Italian priest. Though he often defended his fellow Christians in other denominations, Father Dominick, who had merely tongue lashed the Englishman, nearly came to blows with his superior in defense of the church. From that day forward, Dominick was known in church circles as the warrior Jesuit priest. And yet he was also considered to be a maverick by many of his superiors and peers. His scholarly abilities and mastery of seven languages, including his native French, added to his grasp of apologetics and knowledge of the scriptures, had decided his career within the church. Sister Monique Clausin, who had a similar background and had been an interpreter at the Vatican, was a natural choice as he secretary and aide.

It had been several years since Dominick had presided over a church service or even said mass and as many years since Monique had functioned as a nun. Both were considered prodigies in the church. A feeling of urgency to serve his church on behalf of all Christendom had once again been ignited in the priest, but Sister Monique had been quite happy acting as a goodwill ambassador, interpreter and secretary-assistant for the prodigal priest. *Why couldn't he just leave things as they were?*

"You will wait until we speak to Bishop Murphy?" She looked hopefully at his flushed face as they seated themselves in the backseat of the cab.

"Yes-yes," he said hoarsely, as he sat his laptop upon his knees. "Now hush, be quiet. I must prepare for this event. What was the words Mademoiselle Largo used? Ah yes, a close encounter. But we know what it was, eh Monique?"

"Yes, indeed," the nun smiled wanly, "the Sign of the Dragon."

As an introduction to his rush of thoughts, the priest typed:

Today, from the window of Flight 127, I have seen the Dragon. Where now is the Beast who cannot be far away? All the Protestant fundamentalists claim the Devil will begin his work in Europe and that the False Prophet and Antichrist will be found in the remnants of the Roman Empire, which is in Italy, Germany or perhaps France. But I wonder now if the Dragon will not straightaway seek out the Beast. There is something strange and inconsistent with what we have seen, almost theatrical, flying in the face of eschatological and Apocalyptic tradition. I sense—no I believe—that a different interpretation of Saint John's Revelations is in order that will upset traditional eschatology. Perhaps it will even make me a heretic in many Christians' eyes.

We the passengers of Flight 127 have seen the Devil's debut in Los Angeles—the City of the Angels. This, I believe, must be where it all begins, and it is to my eyes, a Jesuit priest, among all clerics, that God allowed this to be first seen!

## Voice In The Wilderness

He paused in the sunset, his red hair stirring in the breeze. Something excited him about the setting; he could feel it in the air. As the sun set over the buildings, one last flash of brilliance greeted his tired eyes. Without a moonlit sky, night fell suddenly over Skid Row, deepening quickly into progressive shades of gray, purple, and then black. As lamplight cast his shadow onto the pavement, a special warmth seemed to surround his soul, fortifying him against the unknown.

Against the darkness, which had gobbled up the street, an inner peace and abiding faith swelled inside him. It was the worst time on Skid Row—no place for shoppers, tourists, or anyone else on foot. But for Elijah Gray, it was a special time: a period in which was tested his spiritual strength. With bible in hand, he was ready for the worst part of his twenty-four hour service to God.

In every corner and pocket, he could hear them: the misbegotten and castaway—the dregs of his congregation, settling for the evening or lurking singly or in small groups in alleys and in the park. Many of them, after pandering uptown awhile were now returning, withdrawing with bottle-in-hand, into the bowels of the city. Collectively, whenever possible, this—the worst of the street people—huddled for a smoke, a swig of wine, or just to talk a spell. Today, during normal working hours, he had preached to pedestrians and anyone else who happened to look his way. Earlier, in the late morning, he had preached to the homeless, especially the growing number of families huddled in the park, by the river, or camped in vacant lots. To them, the victims of social and economic woes, he conducted sermons wherever they happened to be. But at night, as they bedded down, he visited them only long enough to gather their prayer requests before striking out for the heartland of Skid Row.

For the heartland bums, as he called them, it was time to find a nook and, in many cases, enjoy, their hard-won booze. A few lingered on the sidewalk or by the curb to share a joke or beg a light. Some hovered as moths around a streetlight or set trashcans ablaze to warm their hands. Tonight, at the end of his preaching schedule, he turned onto an unlit stretch of alley. His only outward illumination was his flashlight, which he used sparingly, and the glow of cigarettes down the line.

As airport runway lights guiding his approach, he used these beacons to prevent himself from tripping over legs and knees in the dark. With his Bible in hand, he sought out familiar faces or just derelicts that were still awake. Occasionally, while probing the darkness with his flashlight, a voice would threaten and he would quickly turn it off. But most of the time they stared like zombies as the bottle passed. Heads would drop, bodies would crumple, until one by one they fell asleep.

Tonight, at what seemed to be a likely spot, Elijah stopped, turned off his light, and stood there peering into the dark.

“Listen,” he suddenly cried, “don’t go to sleep! It’s me again: Elijah Gray. I’ve got something to tell you. So, hold on a minute; your lives may depend on it. Just watch my light and listen to my voice. The last thing I want you to hear before you fall asleep is this: *it’s not too late!* That’s right my friends, Jesus wants you just like you are. Why, I don’t know. I’ve had several talks with Him about you. I keep telling him that you’re not listening. I’d love to stay with my homeless congregation where at least they’re sober. I’d also like to stay in the

mission where its warm and I can get a good night's sleep. But He wants me to spend my evenings here in the hollow—a dark, cold, living hell, where I can get beaten up, maybe killed.”

“I use to be like you guys,” his voice softened. “Before I hit the skids, I had a family, a big house, and a good job. Then I lost them all one by one. First my wife died and then my daughter ran off to Lord knows where. And suddenly I was hitting the bottle. It was so easy to stay lit after work. But then I began drinking during lunch and sometimes even for breakfast, until finally I lost my job, too. I never planned my end, but that's what it was: a death wish. I was so unhappy I wanted to drink myself to death. But I'm not asking you to give up the booze now, this very moment. I'm only asking that you listen to me. This is the easy part. The Lord will help you through the hard part later. Right now, just say to yourself, 'Jesus, I'm listening. I'm a sinner, but my eyes aren't shut and my heart is open. So, give me a chance like you did for Elijah. I don't want to burn in Satan's fires. I don't want to die of sclerosis of the liver or brain rot either. I want to live a happy life and someday be where you are Lord: paradise.'”

“ ‘I'm praying Lord!’” he cried. “I'm repenting before it's too late, before I get sick, die, and wake up in hell! Hear my prayer Lord. Hallelujah! I'm waiting, watching, my eyes uplifted, my spirits afire. I hear you at the gates of my heart, the mouth of my soul, knowing you're there but heeding you not, feeling your love but blinded by sin. Pull me up Lord. Stand me on my feet. I want to walk out of here whole, believing, trusting, and the man you want me to be!’ ”

At this point, after his lofty introduction, he walked down the dark corridor, praying under his breath. Out of politeness he tried keeping his beam low to avoid their eyes. Derelicts, who had been in the darkness too long, were sensitive to light. He had learned to be patient with such people, not merely out of compassion but out of fear of the unknown. Right now, of course, he was in the most unknowable portion of Skid Row: an alley.

Normally, he would preach to anyone that would listen: in the park, on the street, in front of stores, or anywhere else they could be found. Seldom would he venture into a place like this, especially at night, unless he knew who the occupants were. Drug addicts, lunatics, and occasional gang members frequented Skid Row's alleys in search of mischief, drug money, initiation rites, or just to raise hell. Late at night like this, however, even street punks and the normal criminal element avoided this part of town.

To enter an alley down here at this hour, as he was doing, would have struck most gang members as stupid if not brave. It would have been considered insane to anyone else watching him go in. But for Elijah Gray, it was not a test of manhood that brought him into harm's way. He would, if the Lord permitted, avoid this sector entirely, and concentrate on the homeless families and pedestrians up town. They at least listened to him and would not threaten him as did the derelicts in Skid Row. While in the business district, his main headquarters, shoppers and workers had become his greatest beneficiaries, often giving him enough money to buy food and occasionally rent a room.

Skid Row, on the other hand, was filled with danger. It was the most depressing place a preacher could be. It was, of course, where he had found God, but it was also where he hit the skids—the lowest and weakest point in his life. To a reformed drunk, who had been an alcoholic and dropout, himself, the temptation to drink like everyone else down here was therefore strong. Far from uplifting his spirit or making him feel good, it was a constant reminder of what he was and what could not do. The derelicts on Skid Row, including old friends, simply would not listen. There would be few success stories like his own down here. Most men and women

who wound up on the street remained there for life. A growing number of them seemed beyond God's reach. With liquor or drugs as soul mates, many of them would reach the point of no return when, with ruined minds, it was too late to accept Christ. It was for these wretches that his gospel remained on the street. But it was for old friends, that pitiful few he wanted to save, that he braved the dark, enduring the abuse of other derelicts in what seemed the blackest hole on earth.

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Already he had detected several familiar faces. Unfortunately, they were hostile, apathetic, or too drunk to hear. Only a few of these men had shown him interest in the past, while most of them viewed Elijah with irritation: a constant reminder that they lived dreary, unproductive lives. Caught in his flashlight's glow were Skunk Larson, the deaf-mute Little Tom, and Smokin' Al Breen. He could hear Old Judd talking to himself somewhere in the dark. Although there were others he now recognized, he had a limit on how far he would go. After hearing cursing ahead, he stopped abruptly, shut off his light, and stood there pensively in the dark.

"I've been there brothers," he spoke nervously now. "After hitting the skids, I would sit in the alley like this with my bottle, staring at the dark. Sometimes I was afraid. Most of the time I was too drunk to care. But there's a greater darkness than this. It lies inside you, and only the Lord can reach it after you let him in." "Let Jesus be your lamp!" his voice rose again. "Let Jesus be your friend!"

As he quoted from the Bible, he heard movement in the darkness: a great onrush of bodies seemed headed his way. He could hear frightened voices and the shuffle of feet as they approached. For one awful moment, he could smell their unwashed bodies coming closer and closer. The normal mixture of body odors, garbage, and cheap wine, grew stronger in the air. Backing up quickly onto the sidewalk, he watched in horror as several of them followed him out. He found himself bumping into men who had already exited and felt relief as they continued running down the street. Something had obviously spooked them. Judging by the glow of their cigarettes, the first group, which included his friends, remained seated while this latter group fled. As fireflies in blackest night, the remaining derelicts, exhibited the delayed reaction of drunks, rising gradually as points of light, until they, too, emerged on the street.

For several moments, derelicts, drug addicts, and schizophrenics mulled in the front of the alley in separate groups. Within each group, there was a further breakdown on the basis of personalities, gender, or age. Most people on Skid Row, he had found, clumped sooner or later into such cliques, staking out territories in alleys, underpasses, or parks. Such cliques ranged in size from two or three people to a dozen or more individuals, rallying around one dominant bum.

Due to their larger numbers, alley bums, such as these, had greater influence in Skid Row. Not only did they push drug addicts and schizophrenics into the deepest recesses in town, but they kept other derelicts from other alleys out. Fortunately for Elijah, Smokin' Al was the alley boss of this group. Otherwise, this detour on his agenda would be foolhardy, if not downright insane.

Moved by their collective helplessness now, he prayed for these lost souls, especially for the friends he had known so long. These, the flotsam of modern society in the most despised sector of town, were acting like children who were afraid of the dark. Although Elijah had become a nuisance for many of them, for others, like Smokin' Al, he had given encouragement and hope. Ironically, Al Bream didn't drink and, contrary to his name, did not even

smoke. Bronco Stevens, Al's best friend, however, had been an alcoholic most of his adult life. He had, over the years, developed liver damage, and grew progressively ill. All the signs of sclerosis of the liver had been there, but Bronco would not listen until it was too late. Nevertheless, after much praying and preaching, Al's friend, at the end of his life, had accepted Christ. Elijah had stayed with him in the hospital, giving him spiritual comfort throughout his long agonizing death. When it was over, Smokin' Al Breen, Old Judd, and Little Tom were waiting for him on the street below. He knew that he had finally made headway in Al's group, though it was at the expense of Bronco Steven's life.

Countless others, he was sure, were terminally ill, and many of them who had been released from mental institutions prematurely were still insane. But the most pitiful wrecks he had ever encountered were the drug addicts, many of which were afflicted with AIDS. These jittering, perspiring, and pathetic wretches were at the lowest level on Skid Row. They were feared and despised by even the winos, because of the threat they posed. Elijah, who had difficulty fighting his own prejudices, felt intimidated, himself, by this group. He did not mind the vile moods of drunks nearly as much as he did the unpredictability of addicts. One day, in a drug-induced state, they would pretend to be listening to everything he said. On the following day, however, they would be scheming for more drugs. To provide themselves with drug money, in fact, many addicts would waylay their best friends. There was nothing sacred in Skid Row, except friendship between drunks, and yet many of the same addicts, who claimed to have been saved, would commit murder for a fix.

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While many of them continued running, other addicts, too weak or disoriented to go much further, lingered on the sidewalks, blinking dumbly in the light. Most of them were still high on drugs, but a few, who had not provided for their habit, were going through various stages of withdrawal. The schizophrenics, who included several Afghanistan, Iraq, and even older Viet Nam veterans, were the most nomadic people on Skid Row. Like many of the drug addicts before them, they continued wandering down the street. Whatever had driven all these people out of the alley, Elijah realized, still lurked in the shadows. He could not even imagine what it might be, but various theories were presented to him as he decided what to do.

On his way toward the alley, he was greeted by Skunk—the most malodorous man on Skid Row. Skunk, as were all the other drunks in Al's group except Al, himself, was inebriated. It was almost impossible to understand what he said. It sounded like “Don't go into the alley, there's crazed addicts in there!” Several other unintelligible theories were given by members of Smokin' Al's group as they stood there on the street. Old Judd thought that crazed veterans were running amuck. Finally, as Elijah had hoped, Smokin' Al, the only sober man in this group, gave his opinion of what had happened tonight.

“Jive—that's what they givin' you rev!” He stuck out his chin. “It was those cars comin' in tonight. Lord know what dey doin' in dere now!”

“Cars?” Elijah frowned. “What cars? I've never seen cars around here, except *police cars*. Was it those hoodlums again?”

“Wuddn't no cops this time rev,” he said firmly. “Wuddn't no hoodlums neither. Twas three cars filled with people: weirdoes wearin' black robes. Leastways das what the druggies was saying. Only *hoods* is what wuz on dim people's *heads*!”

“Hoods?” Elijah frowned. “What kind of hoods?”

“Kind dat hide yo head,” Al explained “like dem folks in da movies.” “You know.” He tried demonstrating with his coat. “Sneaky-like, like dey should be holdin’ candles and sayin’ something spooky and strange.”

“Devil-worshippers?” Elijah frowned. “Is that what you’re saying, Al? *Devil worshippers* chased these folks out?”

“No.” Al shook his head. “*I* din’t sayin nuttin. Das what dem *druggies* said. Usually dem folks see’n bats or snakes—stuff dat is abstract, you know, hard to explain. But dis talk sound solid ‘n real, like dey not makin’ it up. I heered it from three dif’reent addicts, at three dif’reent times!”

As he listened to Al talk, Elijah looked passed him at the alley, slowly digesting what he said. In a court of law Al, who often saw things that weren’t there, wouldn’t be a reliable witness. But he spoke clearly and reasonably now, and he had never willingly lied about anything in the past. It seemed possible, for that matter, that what Old Judd claimed might also be true, since a group of vets did, in fact, inhabit the bowels of Skid Row.

“Well, it’s the end of October, isn’t it?” Elijah mumbled aloud. “. . . . It’s Halloween. Sometimes I lose track of time, but I do remember seeing partygoers on Eighth. They were heading north though, not south. What on earth would partygoers be doing *down here*?”

“Maybe dey slummin’ it.” Al shrugged. “Fact is rev’reend, dey’s here in *our* alley, not on eighth. You got no business in dere tonight!”

Probing the darkness, a moment, Elijah uttered a nervous laugh as Al followed behind. He was almost convinced that Al’s devil-worshippers were nothing more than young people having fun. But the fact remained that something had, in fact, spooked these people, and that something was still inside and had not yet come out.

“Hol’ on rev!” Al grabbed the back of his coat. “I said you can’t be goin’ in dat alley. Dem folks, what go in dis alley, up to no good! *You gonna get yo’self kilt!*”

“You really think so?” Elijah stopped walking. “What makes you so sure, Al. You didn’t see them yourself. How can you be so sure?”

“I dunno. Call it gut reaction. Mebbe da Lawd speakin’ to me now,” Al replied, holding firmly onto his coat. “But you ain’t goin’ in dere rev’reend! Dey gonna put you in one of dose voodoo trances and cut off yo’ head!”

A familiar feeling of resolve came over Elijah now, as he listened to the details of what devil worshippers did to preachers like him. It was hearsay evidence, taken from people who lived in a dream world, spoken by a man who had trouble with reality, himself, and yet it was getting to him. At the very least, he sensed that a threat waited for him in the darkness beyond.

“Please.” He reached around to disengage his hand. “I know what I’m doing, Al. As long as they weren’t speeding, what’s the harm? Maybe they drove out the other side. It could be silly kids, playing Halloween games. The scare, itself, could still have been caused by another addict or lunatic’s hallucination. Skunk or Old Judd could be right.” “Come on, Al!” He pulled away gently. “The Lord’s with me. He’ll guide my way!”

“He will?” Al looked at him quizzically. “What he say to you rev’? Why would da Lawd want you to get yo’self kilt? They ain’t no one left in dat alley cept dem weirdoes; and dey ain’t gonna listen to you tonight rev. Dey gonna cut you up real fine! You gonna come out of dat alley a soprano and mebbe even lose yo’ *head!*”

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Of all the derelicts in Skid Row, Smokin' Al Breen was his favorite. He had always, in spite of his surroundings, remained cheerful. Even now his sense of humor broke through the darkness, putting a smile on Elijah's face. But he, like all the other men and women, was agitated tonight. Except occasional gang members' cars racing through here during the day, nothing that Elijah could remember had ever affected them like this.... Something evil had come this way. He was sure of this now.

Although mentally ill, himself, Smokin' Al was not a wino and had never used drugs. An incident, which Al had never explained, had left him emotionally disturbed, but not disoriented as were many derelicts on Skid Row. Unlike Skunk, Old Judd, and Little Tom, whose dementia had begun with wine, Al could be cured. Elijah was certain of this. As the only sober man in this group, he was the most levelheaded. He was also the closest to God. Elijah trusted this enigmatic man, whose theory, of all the ones he had heard so far, somehow carried the ring of truth.

"Al," he called over his shoulder, "how long ago did they arrive?"

"Just befo' you came," replied Al. "Dat's what Blinky and her friends said. Dis is as far I go, rev!"

Skunk, Old Judd, and Little Tom, Elijah noted, had already turned back.

"I wished I'd gotten a look at them." He swallowed heavily now. "This doesn't make sense.... It doesn't make sense *at all!*"

"No suh, it don't.... I wouldn't go no futhah rev. Damn it man, thens devil-worshipers up dere!" Smokin' Al's voice trailed off in the background as he followed the others into the dark.

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A foreboding filled him as he watched them depart. Left by himself to face it alone, he gripped his flashlight as he would a weapon. His left hand pressed his Bible to his chest. What waited for him this time in the alley: drug addicts, lunatics, or was it Halloween revelers about to pull a prank? In spite of his abiding faith, he felt foolish and vulnerable now, as if, for the first time in his career, he had gone too far.

Alert to sounds and movement all around, Elijah laughed hysterically to himself before uttering the Twenty-third Psalm, "Yeah, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, because God is with me. His rod and staff, they comfort me. He preparst a table for me in the presence of my enemies. He anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over..."

As he tried to go on, his throat constricted with fear. There was no noise now except the sound of his footsteps and a faint rustling ahead. And yet he could smell something far more ominous than body odor, urine, or alcohol in the air: candles and incense. He was almost sure of it: odors often associated with religious ceremonies, such as a Black Mass.

Attempting to recite the Lord's Prayer now, he found that he was too petrified with fear. The prayer remained muddled in his head. In its place a repetitious "Save me Lord! Give me strength!" poured out of his trembling lips. He was going much further than he had planned, into the worst pocket of Skid Row. Could Skunk be right? Would he be attacked by one of the alley's numerous addicts? Or, as Old Judd, warned, would one of the resident psychos waylay him in the dark? Right now, most of all, he feared Al's warning the most. His friend had heard

someone give a stereotype description of Satan worshipers. Up ahead, on the other side of the alley, he would soon find out if he was right.

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Playing off bricks, trash cans, cardboard boxes, and garbage strewn on the ground, Elijah's flashlight searched for movement in the shadows and signs of life. After several moments of searching, he realized that he had the remaining alley to himself. Al had been right. The homeless, drunks, drug addicts, and even the schizophrenics had been cleaned out. Normally, this far in, there should be a few addicts or schizophrenics or at least a drunk or two passed out against a wall. But this time there was not so much as a black cat roaming in the dark.

As his light focused straight ahead into the blackness, it seemed to reach into the very depths of hell. In spite of his misgivings, Elijah felt that he was doing the right thing. It was, he was convinced, God's will that he check this out. And yet, viewed logically and intelligently, it seemed quite insane.... Al had asked the right question: "Why would the Lord want him to get himself killed? He was breaking the cardinal rules for street preachers: never go into an alley late at night and always keep an exit directly at your back.

Although he could not see or hear them yet, he knew they were there. Unseen and unheard yet, they could not camouflage their presence. Not only was there a foul odor emitted by this group, but there was an utter silence that that made him think they were up to no good.

Finally, quite by accident, one of them bumped a trash can to his left and was caught scrambling away in his light. Skirting the darkness far ahead, he disappeared into the shadows whence he had come. Except for the sound of Elijah's footsteps then, the quiet returned to the alley, until he came closer with his beam.

Several bodies skirted the light this time before disappearing mysteriously into the dark. They were, he realized now, veterans, still affected by the horrors of war. Raising his flashlight higher in the direction of each noise, he found them retreating from the radiance as would wild animals confronted with light. Marveling at this reaction, Elijah found himself following them further and further in.

He had no experience preaching to this group. They were the most illusive derelicts in Skid Row. Nevertheless, his worst scenario included being attacked by these men. He didn't expect to find them running from *him*. In the dark, they had been ready to attack, until he showed them light. This appeared to be symbolic of what they were: night creatures—afraid of God, fleeing from the word as much from the light. The truth was, of course, these poor men were insane. Unlike many derelicts who still had a chance, they were not responsible for what they had become. For them it seemed to be too late.

"Come back," he called. "don't be afraid! Come out of the darkness! Please, join us on the street. You're lives aren't over because of what you endured!"

Lowering his flashlight to his side, he listened expectantly as they hovered in the darkness.

"My name's Elijah." he cried hoarsely. "I am a voice crying in the wilderness. My mission is to bring you the word—the Word of God. I've never met you before. You're like ghosts around here; no one has ever seen you up close. How do you find food? Where do you sleep?" "Please," he said softly "come out of the darkness, *into the light!*"

As wild animals on the fringe of a campsite, afraid of the fire but not of the camper nearby, they remained hidden in the blackness, as if waiting for their chance.

“Listen,” Elijah tried another tactic. “I was never in Viet Nam, Iraq or Afghanistan. I admit it, I dodged service to my county, and I regret it now. But I had a brother who fought in Iraq. He’s had problems, too, just like you. Fortunately, for Ethan, he got help before it was too late. He found the Lord. *You can too!*”

As he rambled on a moment, he could hear one of them whispering warnings to his squad “Watch out men, he’s got a flame-thrower! *He’s trying to flush us out!*”.

As long as he pointed his beam downward and kept talking, they crept continuously up to him, mumbling feverishly to themselves. But if he even moved it an inch, he could hear them retreating again. While his beam rose perceptibly higher, his throat constricted once more with fear as the radiance played upon the dark. As soon as he dropped his beam, they were drawn in, no longer threatened by the beam. Occasionally, as the light jerked upwards, he would catch glimpses of them. They seemed to be darting to and fro in the shadows. Unlike the derelicts, which had been frightened in the night, these men seemed to relish it. They appeared to be drawn into it. Hiding in the alleys at all hours, they were rarely seen in the day. Instead of the deadpan stares of drunks or the desperate look of the homeless, he detected several shabbily clad creatures looking back wild-eyed and fearful at him and to the light in his hands.

As would drunks and addicts during a binge, they found it difficult to distinguish the real world from fantasy. Ironically, in spite of his message, they considered him the enemy. For some reason, they saw a flame-thrower in his hand. More likely, however, something else had frightened them first to push them this way. While he walked toward them, scanning with his light, they continued to retreat, until he could no longer catch them in his beam. The shock had evidently been too great. He could hear the sound of their footsteps echoing somewhere to his left, as if another corridor intersected this alley not far ahead. When he raised his flashlight into the space occupied by those men, it seemed to burn endlessly through the darkness, as if there was no end to this alley and it would eventually reach into the depths of hell.

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Elijah had now passed most of the way through the alley, and yet so far, he had caught no devil-worshippers or Halloween pranksters in his light. From out of the shadows now, as if on cue, appeared more drug addicts—the group he trusted the least. He had not heard their footsteps, until they were at the boundary of his light. Now, from their own dark corridor, they seemed to appear out of nowhere, several men and women, drawn as moths toward his light.

Voices, ranging from whispers to shouts, broke the eerie quiet. At first glance, they all appeared drugged, shuffling trance-like up to him, with smiles, zombie-like expressions, and popeyed looks of awe. He could hear all manner of nonsense pouring from their mouths, from obscene greetings to outright heckling. Some of them, however, those afflicted with disease or malnutrition, were not so lucky, trailing miserably after the first onrush. They reminded him of starving animals searching for food. These desperate addicts, in spite of their afflictions, could be the most dangerous souls on Skid Row.

Almost lost in their catcalls and guffaws, was another sound he had to strain to hear. It sounded like someone groaning in the shadows, but he could not be sure.

Ignoring the addicts as best he could, he searched for the source of the groan. After walking only a short distance, he saw something he had missed before with his light: a derelict crumpled against the wall.

“What is wrong with this man?” he looked back suspiciously at them now.

“They hit him.” an emaciated young man stepped forward from the group. “Dumb asshole just stood as they approached, like a cat does when it sees the headlights of a car.”

“Let’s have a look.” Elijah sighed, reaching down to the man. “When did this happen? How long has he been lying here like this?”

“He ain’t moved for hours.” The young man wiped his nose. “He sort of hit the wall and bounced onto the ground.”

Rolling him gently over onto his back, Elijah turned the light directly onto his face. By now the entire crowd had encircled him. The man had bruises on his face, which could mean many things for a drunk. He could, in fact, have been hit by a car. He could also, as he staggered to find his nest, have walked into the wall accidentally and knocked himself out. Knowing the reputation of these people, however, Elijah considered one more possibility. Seeing all the signs of a mugging here, he again held his flashlight as a weapon in his hand as he inspected the man.

The young man who had chosen to be a spokesman for the others had spoken with remarkable clarity for someone under the influence of drugs, and yet it was he that Elijah feared the most. A slight caste in one of his eyes made him appear sinister. He seemed to enjoy the misfortune of this man.

Focusing his attention now upon to the man, he said a short prayer for him and then asked God to deliver him from this group. As if Elijah’s words had given him life, the man’s face suddenly twitched and he emitted a groan. Smiling faintly at him, Elijah kept a wary eye on the addicts as the man came to.

“Far out man!” the young man cried. “He’s back from the dead!”

“Wha-a-a-a happened?” he heard him mumble.

“You’re injured.” Elijah tried to explain. “I don’t know how bad yet. They said you were hit by a car.”

“I-I’m-mm ho-o-kay,” the man’s tongue rolled thickly around in his mouth.

“Don’t try to move.” Elijah shook his head “You probably need a doctor. Sit here against the wall until I get help!”

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During the silence that followed, he saw a flashlight beam, and discovered, with mixed emotions, that a fourth group of derelicts was emerging from the dark. Realizing that another corridor crossed this alley, he stood there in wonderment, as the last group approached. As his flashlight beam played upon bricks, concrete, cardboard boxes, and mounds of trash, it finally caught the dark entrances on each side of the alley. It seemed, in his befuddled state of mind, as if he had stumbled into a great cavern: an underworld city of bums. When he heard voices again and looked around shakily, the terrible illusion faded, as would a dream within a dream. It seemed to Elijah at such times that life here on Skid Row was divided into various levels of torment—a nightmare, as in Dante’s Inferno, in which he was preaching the Gospel among the damned.

When the drunk looked up and saw his friends, he suddenly came alive. Against Elijah’s advice, he struggled to his feet, shirking off his efforts to give him a helping hand. His friends were allowed to steady him a moment, then allowed him to go it alone when he was finally standing up.

“We’ll take care of him,” said the man holding the light. “

“Suit yourselves,” Elijah snorted, rising to his feet. “He’s a very lucky man. He sure is drunk!”

“I’m-mm not injurred,” the man said, wobbling around in the dark.

Turning back to the drug addicts, Elijah wondered when they would leave. They just stood there in overwhelming numbers, as the fourth group departed, blocking his passage to the end of the alley. He could hear them talking in murmurs amongst themselves.

Suddenly, as if the Lord himself had given him a prod, he began gently edging his way through this group. Silently, without explaining his actions he continued onward, listening to their murmurs of surprise, more afraid, at this point, of what was behind him than what lie ahead.

He knew that something waited up ahead but he was not sure what it was. At least it would not be drug addicts or drunks. They were now safely behind him as were the vets. Nor was it gang members or other criminal elements roaming this twilight zone of Skid Row? Only God’s fool would enter such a zone, traveling further than any sober or sane person would ever go.

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As he pressed deeper and deeper into the unknown, he found his legs going where his mind no longer wanted to go. Pure faith drove him now. For several more moments into a corridor darker than anything he had ever known where even the lunatics and addicts didn’t go, he walked quietly, his flashlight trained directly ahead. When he thought he might have escaped danger and that there was nothing more menacing left to find, he stopped and pondered the dark. He had thought he was close to the exit now, but suddenly the alley seemed to deepen... Had Al’s devil-worshippers gone out the other side? Or was there actually miles of alley ahead? This question, which he tried shrugging off, seemed absurd, and yet the illusion, if that’s what it was, was stark and menacing. Where there more denizens lurking ahead. Not wanting to believe this was the case, he was tempted to pivot, at this point, and report back to his friends. He would like to say, with a clear conscious, that he had found nothing up here. He was a preacher, after all, and an ex-street person, himself. He felt ill equipped emotionally to confront devil-worshippers, if that is what they were. This kind of stuff was in novels and movies. He had always considered these types of people to be phonies; harmless fools who had taken a wrong turn. He had preached a simple and fundamentalist message, which was devoid of supernaturalism and belief in the occult. He did not believe in ghosts, witches, or sorcerers, as did many of the Jamaican and Haitian people on the street. And yet here he was plunging into the unknown, half convinced that Satanists had invaded Skid Rows.... Now, however, as he looked back into the darkness, it seemed too late to retreat. He had traveled too far down the alley, which never seemed to end.

It was at the very moment that he saw the end. There it was, he thought, sighing with relief: the alley exit. He could see a street lamp ahead. But then suddenly, at that point, several meters ahead, he saw a second light from the alley wall. It was a mere crack of radiance below a door—probably the side entrance to a building on the next street. Almost immediately, in spite of the terror he felt, he found himself pressing forward but stopping just short of the door. Coming from inside the building, he heard voices and resounding echoes that originated deep within the room. Again, as he approached the door, he recited the Twenty-third Psalm. This time he followed it with a hurried recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. While scanning the brick wall beyond the first door, he discovered a second door: a large corrugated entrance

that looked like a shipment door. This small door was merely an exit, perhaps an emergency exit, while an aged sign over the corrugated door read “Receiving.” Though he saw light around the edges of the door it was locked. After trying to raise the shipping door, he found it locked too. Tiptoeing onto the street, as if he was crossing a minefield, he emerged onto the sidewalk. Looking up he saw a third sign, obviously the marquee of the building that read in faded letters Faber and Sons, he approached the main entrance with the greatest trepidation. There were cars parked on the street, which should have been another warning sign for Elijah, and yet he reached for the doorknob, turned it, and found it unlocked. Uttering a plea to God for forgiveness for his foolishness, he muttered Christ’s words to his disciples, “Thou shall not tempt to Lord.”

Entering a shadowy room, which might have been the receptionist room but was now barren of furniture or décor, he kept his light trained on the floor and listened to voices deep in the bowels of the building. He expected to hear the conventional mumbo jumbo heard during satanic rites, but instead he heard laughter and merriment. The current room, upon close inspection, in fact, seemed to be a receptionist’s room at one time. There was a counter in front of the fourth door. Behind the counter was an ancient pull-away desk, a rusty filing cabinet, barren shelves along the walls, and an empty trash can nearby, all of which indicated to him that it had not been used in this capacity for a long time. How vandals or thieves had missed writing graffiti or stealing the remaining chair behind the desk, he couldn’t imagine. Why the third door was unlocked was also a mystery to him now. In spite of his suspicions and fear, however, he pressed his ear to the fourth door and listened to noise on the other side. The muffled sounds seemed to indicate that a party was in progress. Turning the doorknob, he opened the door. A faint creaking—the sound of an inner sanctum, caused him to jump and utter a startled gasp. After shining his light down a short passageway, he discovered yet another door.

Without pausing, he found himself turning its knob, opening the fifth door, and, in slow, measured increments, climbing up a rickety timeworn staircase. Each step creaked and moaned—bringing to mind again the proverbial inner sanctum. By now Elijah was certain that they must have heard him. At the top of the stairs, he discovered a darkened balcony, which allowed him to overlook what seemed to be warehouse below. Quickly, he turned off his flashlight.

Several dozen men and women were socializing in Halloween costumes, ranging from hooded monks to caped vampires. Because of the large volume of participants, he assumed that many of them had entered the warehouse from the street, just as he had. Clearly, his mind rejoiced, this was not a Black Mass or Satanic orgy. One of his original suspicions proved to be true. These were simply young adults (college or high school students) in the midst of Halloween revelry. The hooded monk was probably one of the devil-worshippers Al had seen.... Is this what had frightened the derelicts out of the alley? He wondered. It didn’t seem likely to him. Could it have been something else he hadn’t seen? Or had Skunk or Old Judd been right? Had one of the addicts gone berserk earlier or had it been the vets all along? ... What had caused the panic and stampede out the other end of the alley?

Quietly retracing his steps, Elijah walked down the noisy staircase, thankful that there was so much noise down below. When he emerged in the street below, he looked around, wondering which way to go. There was no alley left to search. Should he circle around and return to his friends or call it a night and return to his apartment downtown. Deciding to return and report “all clear” to his friends waiting on the next street, he began putting distance between himself and the building.

It was at that very moment that something flew passed the corner of his eye. Directly ahead now he saw the headlights of a swiftly moving car. With less than a moment to get out its way, he cursed himself for testing God and placing his life at risk. Would he suffer the same fate of poor Harold Longland, a bygone friend targeted by a drunken motorist? What if he swerved, ran up on the curb, and tried to run him down, as the motorist had done to Harold? Where could he hide? What recess could he find? Looking around for entryways and more alleys, he found an endless row of boarded up buildings with shallow entrances but no place to hide.

As the car slowed down a few meters down the boulevard, as if to toy with him before plunging ahead, he uttered a portion of the Lord's prayer and then began whimpering miserably to himself: "Please Lord, let him pass me by. I have much more work to do for you. Don't let them run me down!" Convinced that this was exactly what he was going to do, he pressed himself as flat as he could against a nearby wall, held his breath, and waited for it to approach. As he stood there holding onto an ancient drainpipe, he found his memory traveling back over time in which he had fallen from society and wound up a derelict on the street. It had been a long and heart-rending odyssey and it seemed to be ending now. But as he opened his eyes and looked straight ahead, the car remained stopped, engine rumbling and lights piercing the dark. It just sat there a moment, until he heard the doors open and shut. Shadows emerged, halting momentarily, as they caught sight of Elijah. Soon he heard the faint sound of footsteps coming from that direction, its occupants—dark robed figures with flashlights in their hands were walking his way.

In the glow of their lights now, he felt trapped, not knowing whether he should flee or stay. If he fled, they could easily run him down. If he stayed, there was no telling what they would do. So far, they had said nothing intimidating to him. They had even stopped to avoid running him over. They walked ever so slowly in a nonchalant way, politely training their beams to the ground. And yet they symbolized in his confused and disoriented mind all that was evil in life. Were they, as Al surmised, devil-worshippers and evil purveyors of the black arts?

When they were a few meters from where he stood, he spiritually took the offensive. He began quoting scripture to them as if they were just ordinary bums. While he sermonized, he heard one of them talking but ignored him, fearing to break his concentration at such a time. Caught in the glow of a street lamp across the street now, were outsiders, not denizens of Skid Row, and yet the most terrifying specters he had seen. With shaven heads and tattooed necks and arms, six gang-bangers approached Elijah, mischief in their dark eyes.

"Hey," the tallest and meanest looking Hispanic called out, "you're that preacher bum I saw up in Pershing Square!"

"That's him all right," a squat, bowlegged youth nodded. "My Uncle Diego told me about him. His name's Elijah, like that dude in the Bible."

For a moment, their banter almost sounded friendly. Perhaps, he thought hopefully, they were just being whimsical and wanted to make fun of him for a while. But then, the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth Hispanic youth stepped forth. As they began mocking him, Elijah's mind reeled with images of his own destruction.

"Hey, preacher let's hear a prayer," the third youth taunted.

"Yeah, padre," a fourth sneered, "perform a miracle for us. Turn my piss into wine."

While waving a shiny knife, the fifth Hispanic merely sneered, while a sixth, recalling another famous passage, suggested he raise himself from the dead. Lord, Elijah whispered to himself, is this how you want me to end? I've been faithful and have fought to good fight. Long ago, after changing my life, I've tried to live a righteous life. I've dedicated my life in service to

you. I have so much to do for the downtrodden and misbegotten. Please save me now. Don't let these thugs harm your servant. If I die, who will minister on Skid Row?

Suddenly, as he prayed with his eyes shut, he was surrounded by the six youths. It had happened in the past. To prove their machismo and callous disregard for law and order, another beating—perhaps murder—at the hands of gang-bangers was about to commence. Opening his eyes, he looked around at their shadowy forms, expecting to feel fists pummeling him, perhaps knives, until he heard a deep voice in his mind say, “Fear not, Elijah. I’ve heard your prayer. Warn them once. Then, if necessary, in my name, strike them down!”

“I speak for the Lord,” Elijah shouted in a shaky voice. “Back off. Don’t tempt God’s anger. Hurry, while there’s still time. Flee this place and never come back!”

“Ho-ho.” The chief gang member snickered. “He’s threatening us. He wants us to runaway. This guy’s got balls. He speaks for God! He parades around as preacher, but he’s just another stinking bum!”

A pipe materialized in the sixth gang member’s hand, and the fifth Hispanic who brandished the knife, brought back his blade. As the other youths pulled out brass knuckles and more knives, voices sounded from the door Elijah had exited, “What’s going on over there? What are those guys doing? ... Hey, we’re calling the police!” While the Halloween merrymakers stood helplessly by and watched Elijah’s apparent demise, the ground shook below the preacher. After this, as the Spirit of the Lord filled Elijah, there was thunder and then the crackle of lightning out of the clear, cloudless, night sky. A flash of light around their silhouettes, accompanied by a collective gasp, was followed by an eerie sight. For a moment, Elijah looked around the group in wonder: he could see their bone structure against the light and smell burning flesh. The evil rampage of this gang against helpless vagrants had ended. Rising up onto his legs after cowering on the sidewalk, Elijah watched his tormentors crumple and break apart into ashes that were blown away in a sudden gust of wind.

At that point, a young man in a Buzz Lightyear costume edged forward. “Whoa,” he hooted, “did you see that?”

“Yeah,” a female voice sounded, “what a way to end Halloween night!”

A third young man dressed as a cowboy outfit slapped his knee. “That was awesome, mister! How’d you do it? That was trick, right? Where’s those guys go? They seemed to vanish in thin air!”

At least two dozen more costumed figures—cartoon characters, goblins, vampires, and ghosts muttered in awe, until a tall, muscular girl masquerading as a zombie stepped forth.

“No,” she exclaimed, frowning at the others. “As one of the designated drivers, I’m not drunk. Didn’t you feel that shaker and hear thunder? Lighting struck those gang-bangers, turning them into carbon fragments.” “This wasn’t an illusion or parlor trick.” She visibly shuddered. “... When the police arrive, this is going to be hard to explain.”

“Don’t worry,” a masked vampire reassured her. “I was told about this place. The police avoid it like the plague. This is Skid Row. It’ll take them an hour to answer this call.”

“Well, we were trespassing,” the zombie reminded them. “That building might be abandoned, but it belongs to someone. Half of us are under age. We reported a gang-banger attack in front of Faber and Sons Warehouse. The police can’t ignore *that*. Let’s get-the-hell out of here before they arrive!”

Moving hastily to their cars parked on the street, they barely gave him anymore notice. Fear of being caught outweighed Elijah’s miracle, which was just as well, he thought. How could he ever explain what happened to patrolmen when the asked him what

happened. Light-headedly, as he began sprinting down the block, he imagined a play script in his mind.

Policeman: “Did you call in a potential homicide?” one of them might ask.

“No, officer,” Elijah could see himself replying, “Halloween merrymakers made the call.”

“Where are they?” a second policeman would challenge. “I don’t see any merrymakers. Are you drunk sir?”

“No, officer,” Elijah would insist. “It’s true. Because they were afraid of getting into trouble, they went home. Many of them were underage.”

“All right sport.” The officer would snarl after a cursory inspection. “You tell me yourself, what happened here tonight.”

“It’s like this officer,” Elijah would try explaining, “a gang of Hispanics attacked me, and the Lord struck them dead...”

The remainder of the story he would tell them (unless he lied) was too fantastic—just the sort of thing a burnt out drunk might tell. Although police force paid little attention to Skid Row bums, he avoided such encounters. No one was going to believe his story, especially the police.

“No,” he told himself, as he pivoted sharply right at the corner and headed for his small apartment downtown, “I know what happened.... So did those kids. It’s not an illusion as some of them thought or a hallucination. I witnessed a miracle. The Lord saved me. My faith has paid off!”

Feeling stronger in his belief than ever before in his checkered life, Elijah Gray called it a night and, after visiting the all-night diner near his apartment, turned in for a well-earned rest.

## Welcome to Purgatory

A fateful meeting of metal and flesh had made him a fugitive. From that turbulent moment, the endless freeways and highways thrust him further and further away from home. Even now his escape from the accident continued to spiral with a momentum that was far out of proportion to the original deed. Across a continent to flee judgment in one small town, he exiled himself from his past, marooning himself on a road that was leading nowhere.

The road had imprisoned him. It was where he had committed his crime, and it was punishing him. Each time that he stopped for food or rest, the road ahead reminded him that he had to go on. Every car following mysteriously behind became a threat. Every town was merely a frightening stopover filled with suspecting faces.

Even now, after several hundred miles of driving, the terrible accident filled him with dread. Because of his previous record, it would be three strikes for him. He couldn't go back to prison—probably for the remainder of his life. He had driven evasively from the scene, propelled by this fear, taking a circuitous path from highway to highway. Only once had he seen anything suspicious in his mirror, but he knew they were still in pursuit. He had heard about the accident each hour. There was an interstate all points bulletin out for his arrest. They would never give up, not after what he had done. For hundreds of miles he had driven as if they were right on his tail. At times his concern seemed to be unwarranted by the facts. Across a continent to flee a murder in one small town, he exiled himself from his past, marooning himself on a winding road that was leading nowhere.

The road had imprisoned him. It was where he had committed the crime, punishing him for his cowardly act. The two people he hit had died instantly. Though there was hardly a dint on his grill and he had stopped once to wipe off the blood and brain matter, the smear left on his conscience was indelible. The road was therefore, from a different vantage point, his refuge, allowing him a limitless avenue to make his escape. And it was his protector. Each time that he stopped for food, gas, or rest, it reminded him that he had to go on. He seemed safe as long as he moved. Yet every car following mysteriously remained a threat. Every town was merely a frightening stopover filled with suspecting faces. The world he felt safe in was a narrow corridor surrounded by homeward bound strangers.

His only consolation was being able to stop and look out once in awhile at them and hope that he, too, could find a new home. Although he was too exhausted to continue his journey, he was only a hundred miles from the California border and wanted to cross before dawn. Had there not been a statewide net in place, he would have preferred crossing into the Canadian or Mexican borders, but that was out of the question. His only possible refuge was his father's old cabin in the San Bernardino Mountains. It was the only good thing the old man had ever left him. His mother wrote to him about the cabin while he was in prison and told him that his father wanted him to have it. The old man had waited until he was serving time in prison to make the offer. The fact that he had been dead all these years and he had only his mother's words worried him. Though in a remote location and on a rocky, mountain road, squatters could have taken it over, it could have burned down, or the old man might even have sold it in spite of his mother's claim. Nevertheless, it had become his only goal; he had read about criminals hiding out for years in remote locations. If it was still there and uninhabited it would give him respite for a while until he could plan his next move. Unfortunately, the current major Southwestern city he was passing through was congested with homeward bound commuters. An apparent accident

ahead increased the congestion, until he found himself in a traffic jam reminiscent of cities on the east coast. In a path frequented with sudden, inexplicable detours, he at least had the grim satisfaction to know that he had a full tank of gas and was on the right road. He had all the time in the world. He had nowhere to go except 'away'. And yet these stoppages made him feel vulnerable and trapped. The traffic on both sides of his car soon became dense and sluggish. As fingers of diversity now, it controlled his dilemma, yet, for the time being, allowed him time to search the side of the freeway for a promising off-ramp. While he scanned the landscape on his right for just the right detour, he spotted a row of flares, a disabled vehicle, and a red flashing light ahead. A well-honed caution instinctively drove his steering wheel to the left, when a car-length patch of pavement appeared beside him. But this decision, along with his decision not to pull over when he had the chance, turned out to be a miscalculation: the off-ramps were now out of reach, the flashing light became a tow truck in his rear-view mirror, and the traffic seemed to close ranks around him.

Rumbling close to him, approaching menacingly behind, it goaded him on a great chain of being. To his tired mind, he had become merely a particle in its body, unable to escape its momentum. When he had recovered from this distorted impression, his mind was lulled into an even more dangerous state: drowsiness. At this point, the pressing traffic, which had kept him alert and on guard, began thinning out on the outskirts of town. The iron stream began emptying itself quickly into the surrounding suburbs. Still moving heavily near the city limits, the highway had veered west to avoid a huge row of black mesas. Most of the remaining motorists emptied more quickly into outlying suburbs as they chased the dying sun home. Now, as the road dipped south again, he seemed to have the road to himself. The great and uncompromising feeling of guilt and loneliness he carried with him was dulled by exhaustion. Sunset and the collapse of night signaled to his eyes that he was on the brink of falling asleep.

In spite of the danger, he decided to wait until it was completely dark before stopping to rest or get something to eat. But as the sun blinked out below the horizon, his eyelashes fluttered desperately to make room for blurred and unsteady vision. Finally, a sudden dull pain coursed through his brain, and he awakened as suddenly as he had fallen asleep. Either he had hit something or rode over a bump in the road. There was no one in front of him. Had his forehead hit the steering wheel? What caused such a momentary shot of pain? Immediately trying to sum up his dilemma, he gripped his steering wheel and peered breathlessly ahead. He knew that he had fallen asleep, but it couldn't have been for long. A second or even a split second could have been disastrous, he thought, shaking his head. He had been careless not to pull into a MacDonald's or other drive through for coffee. He could have tail-ended someone or veered off the road. And yet, to his surprise, there was no one ahead or behind him. He was moving at the same speed, in the same lane, and going to the same place he had been going for days: the California border.

Once again doubt consumed him. What if his plan to sneak into California proved foolhardy? There could, even at this early stage, be a roadblock? Was his crime great enough to warrant such a measure? Much of his fear, he realized, after so many miles, was magnified by the deed, itself: the faces of the old couple he struck, the sickening sound of bones crunching and the thump of his wheels driving over the bodies in the road. Despite his fears, however, he had seen nothing yet to justify them. There was so much other news crowding out that one event: the current war, a new terrorist threat, and a multiple murder at a military base. Was he that special? His throbbing head, drooping eyes, and trembling frame told him once again that he needed food again and he needed rest. At this stage of his journey, he decided it was time to

stop. He was ravenously hungry and craved a shower, and he couldn't drive another mile without once more falling asleep. Pulling off the road, he sat there a moment, letting his headlights burn the dark. With hesitation, he turned off the ignition and lights and set the gearshift in park. In the middle of nowhere, having no idea where he was, he felt safe enough to sleep. Reaching into his glove compartment, he pulled out his clock, its phosphorescent face emitting an eerie light. Next to it sat a bag of Fritos, which would have to suffice for dinner, until he officially stopped. Raising the clock up carefully, he set it for one hour, and then adjusted his seat to a comfortable angle for sleep. After closing his eyes and snuggling into his coat, he let his mind and body take flight on that path of retreat on which he was again driving: always away, never toward—away from his life, pursuits, family, and friends, away from everything he once loved. As he dreamed, the images changed to different people and different places but always came back to the same familiar theme: the road, his crime, and the long, long journey away.

At the end of a series of crashing events, he had arrived, from a world in which all the atoms were in collision. A failed career, broken marriage, and drift into white-collar crime, culminating in the hit-and-run crime committed on the road had led to this point. If he hadn't hit those pedestrians, he wouldn't have taken this detour. If he had stopped, instead of fleeing from the scene, he could have told them the couple had been jaywalking. What prevented him from making this decision was the fact he had been drinking beer that evening, and there appeared to be no witnesses. If he hadn't been drinking, if there had been witnesses, and if he had been clear-headed enough to make the right decision, he might have gotten off with a DUI and escaped jail.... If—that awful conjunction that would haunt him all his days. One terrible event, far worse than graft and cooking the books had brought him to the lowest point in this life.

Now in the midst of sleep, with his alarm clock set to ring, he was about to take the greatest detour of his life.

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From out of nowhere again, lights appeared in his mirror, but this time he did not see them. Entering his ears, but too faint to awaken him from sleep, were the sounds of an engine being cutoff, a door lightly shutting, and footsteps on the shoulder.

“Sir,” a voice came into his dream, “please get out of your car!”

At first, he thought he was still dreaming. A nonsensical imagery had been playing in his dreamscape. The flashlight in his eyes proved to be his wake-up call. Again, the shadowy figure demanded he exit, rapping the window impatiently as he remained frozen in his seat.

“This is the highway patrol,” the man bellowed. “Open your goddamn door!”

Jolted into action, he turned the key, ground the ignition, and sped away down the road. Stomping the accelerator to the floor, he was thankful he was driving a V-8. In hot pursuit, siren blaring, the squad car began its chase. For several miles he was chased, gradually gaining ground on the trooper, until something dreadful happened. Up ahead a man was crossing the road. In the middle of the desert it could have been a Navajo Indian or a stranded motorist. It made no difference. This time, he swerved the wheel to miss the jaywalker and found his car plunging over an embankment and suddenly in mid-air. Certain that his time had come, during the time he swerved off the road and crashed, he found himself praying for forgiveness and mercy for his immortal soul. A lifelong Catholic, he managed to recite the Rosary. When his vehicle hit the ground, his head hit the roof of the car, then, as it began to roll down a short hill, slam the windshield and then the side of the door. For those moments, as he

lapsed into unconsciousness, his body floated in the inner space between life and death...and then there was darkness.

When he awakened, he was lying in the sand, outside of this vehicle, apparently thrown clear of the burning car. "Thank you, Lord," he mumbled. "I'm alive. That's all that matters." At this point, he fully expected the trooper to find him, arrest him, and bring him to justice for his crime. In fact, he was resigned to his fate. But the desert was quiet. The night that had collapsed onto this corner of the world was, with the exception of a cloud-covered moon, forebodingly still. He was alive, he concluded now, and he had been given a second chance. If he was caught now, at least he wasn't dead. If he somehow escaped, he must somehow find that cabin and lay low for a very long time.

Without a car, however, his task was daunting. He would have to run into the desert to escape capture and surface far down the road, hoping to reach the next town. He could not imagine what he would do at that point. He had just enough money for motels and gas. Now he wouldn't have to worry about filling his tank, but he would have no transportation. His prospects boggled his mind.... Yet he was momentarily free. Looking back as he ran into the desert, he could see no one on the highway. Why hadn't the patrolman shown up? He must have seen his burning vehicle. Where was his pursuer? It occurred to him, as he walked in a daze those moments, the highway patrolman should be on the side of the road now, studying the scene, and yet he was nowhere in sight. Slowing down, as he scanned the ground below, he found the setting eerily silent. Not so much as a cricket chirped nor did a single night bird fly overhead. When, after a short while, his eyes could make out the distant lights of a town, he felt safe enough to skirt the shoulder of the highway. Scanning the road behind once more, he surged ahead, a second wind feeling him with courage and strength.

When he reached the outskirts of the town, a sign greeted him, barely legible in the light. Strangely enough, the letters of the sign had been etched in stone, which seemed peculiar for such a small town. As he approached the sign, he was finally able to read it. The moon broke through the clouds that moment, highlighting the inscription. It read Welcome to Purgatory. There wasn't a population figure below it, which also seemed strange, and beyond the pretentious landmark, sat a hamlet of darkened houses and one lone building that read simply 'Motel'—none of which inspired confidence. But he knew, as he passed the sign, crossed the threshold into the town, and entered the manager's office that he would finally be safe. No mortal man could touch him now. Considering his crime, he would, in fact, be here for a very, very long time.

"Greeting stranger," an elderly man called out. "We've been expecting you. Hah, another "death bed repent. If you hadn't uttered that prayer, you'd be in a much worse place.... Will, you have a reservation. Let's call it an extended stay."

"So, it's true," he replied numbly. "I passed a town called Furnace Creek in New Mexico. It looked like this in the dark, but this *really is* Purgatory!"

"Of course," the man frowned. "What did you expect? ... Heaven? ... Hardly, after one last minute prayer."

In spite of his earlier resolve, sudden misgivings filled him. A chilling thought rang in his head: he wasn't alive; he was dead. Nevertheless, he was greatly tempted to escape and continue his odyssey to the mountain cabin.

"How long will I be here," he asked looking around the room in panic—a century, a millennium, a million years?

The man shrugged. “That depends on you sir. I’m just the caretaker—a sort of gate keeper, until my times up.” “By the way,” he warned, “there’s no way out. You’ll find that out soon enough.” “Go ahead,” he made scooting motions, “flee. Everyone tries it. I did to. Run, along now!”

As he backed away from the desk, the man stood there grinning with amusement, a gleam in his dark eyes. Into the night he ran, due west, unwilling to accept his fate. He had, after all asked for forgiveness, surely, he merited heaven. He must be in a hospital bed right now, in a coma. This had to be a bad dream. He must wake up and rejoin the living.... He was not ready to die. As he ran passed a row of apartments, darkened or dimly lit, however, he looked forward and saw a rectangular shape looming ahead of him. Running around to the front of the shape, he saw in the moonlight those same words, etched in stone: Welcome to Purgatory.

Seeing the empty desert behind he felt encouraged, and began running again, his goal to prove that he wasn’t dead. The unsettling silence was depressing. He longed to see headlights from oncoming vehicles or the lights and sound of a plane overhead. At least, he expected to hear birds, insects, or the wind whistling alongside his face.... And yet there was nothing. Finally, when he saw lights in the distance, his pace slowed. He dreaded what lie ahead. “Please God,” he prayed, “give me one more chance!”

But he had his chance. As he approached another rectangular monolith, he could make out in lunar light the words again “Welcome to Purgatory.” Beyond this landmark sat the same Motel office and its apartments. With one last ounce of rebellion, he ran directly into the desert and, after a fruitless stretch, saw the highway ahead. This time he was able to see the demarcation of the town, from sign to sign, the small cluster of buildings and motel complex fixed squarely in the middle. Moving like a sleepwalker this time, he arrived in the manager’s office, walked up to the desk, and was handed a key.

“It’s so dark out there,” he muttered. “Even the moon shuns me.”

“It’s always like this here,” the manager explained wearily. “There’s no day—only night. It never changes. You don’t sleep. You don’t eat.... You just pray a lot... and wait for your turn.”

“How long have you been here?” He turned to ask. “What was *your* crime?”

“I was a garden variety thief. I’ve lost track of time in this place. There are no clocks or calendars here.... If it’s been this long for me, think how long it’ll be for you. Get used to it and do your time.... You’re going to be here a long, long time.”

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The burning wreck he had left behind was now surrounded by an investigative team from nearby Kingman, Arizona. A fire engine sat on the shoulder, as fireman returned their gear to the truck. The highway patrolman, who had chased him, stood in the background with a fellow officer, a dour look on his face, as he explained his hot pursuit.

“I did what I thought was correct, but I should’ve let the bastard go and called ahead.”

“What exactly happened?” asked the second officer, staring at the smoldering car. “Did he just lose control?”

“I dunno.” The first officer shrugged. “Why he cut his wheel like that I’ll never know. Maybe it was suicide. There wasn’t any traffic on the road, not so much as a rabbit.”

“Well he’s toast now.” The second officer smiled grimly.

Down in the hill, an investigator was shining a light into the wreck, muttering to his

partner, “I don’t think he suffered. This must’ve shattered his skull. The number of the plate that highwaymen gave us belongs to hit-and-run driver. Unless someone stole his car, that’s him inside. Well, he paid for his crime. Son-of-a-bitch ran over an old couple. He just kept on going. He got a taste of what’s waiting for him. I bet it’s pretty hot there: h-e-double-l!”

“No one really knows,” the second investigator chided. “That’s one place we don’t return from. I’m getting along in years. In my church, we believe in a middle place for some folks.”

“You mean Hades?”

“No.” He shook his head. “It’s called Purgatory.”

“Oh yeah,” the first man chuckled. “That’s where you get a second chance. When I was young, I remember the preacher of my church. For him, it was either turn or burn—no in between. I kind’ve like what the Catholic’s offer. I’ll probably get a few centuries in Purgatory myself. Is it hot or cold down there?”

“Who’s to say it’s down or up,” the other men said thoughtfully. “It could be hot or cold. It might just be a dark unfriendly place for folks to ponder on their sins.” “I don’t want to go down there.” He shuddered comically. “I might meet my ex-wife.”

The two men laughed, an edge to their voices. Their laughter carried up the hill, sounding callous to the highway patrolmen now leaving the scene. Recalling the behavior of the driver, the first officer sat in his patrol car a moment, staring into space. Why had that man swerved off the road? he asked himself, recalling his frightened face. He had a fast car and might very well have escaped. Instead, he turned his vehicle sharply in what seemed suicidal, winding up burnt to a crisp.

“Damn-it-to-hell!” he muttered. “I shouldn’t have chased him down. Why’d he do such a damn fool thing?”

## The Gopher Mound

The antique crystal goblets in Lorna Ramsay's cabinet began rattling against each other as the temblor rumbled through Orange, Riverside, and Los Angeles Counties. The living room chandelier tinkled ominously as the house shook and walls creaked. The pandemonium of dogs barking in the neighborhood and the rumble of the earthquake, itself, now played sluggishly through Lorna's murky dream. The rhythmic beating of their bed's headboard against the wall came as distant drumming from another world.

"Earthquake! Earthquake!" she heard herself mumbling as she tumbled down to earth. Turning immediately to her sleeping husband afterwards, she shook him violently and, when this didn't work, pounded unmercifully on his chest.

"Carter! Carter!" she cried in the dim light. "For heaven's sake, wake up! Get on your feet!"

As Carter Ramsay sat up, rubbed his eyes, and stared slack-jawed around the room, he felt as if he was on his boat and caught in the midst of a gale. From this dream-like state, he also felt his wife dragging him bodily from the bed toward the bedroom door.

"Wha... whazzamattah... Whaz happenin' to me?" he groaned, as he was jerked suddenly to his feet.

"Move it you old fool!" she cried frantically. "It's a shaker—a big one!"

"Jesus, Lorna," he protested feebly, "the doorway's too narrow for us. There's not enough room!"

"Hold me Carter!" she screamed, as the shaking worsened. "This might be the end!"

Until now, Carter's mind had been steeped in dream imagery. As he was tossed about on the ocean, he felt safe and invincible on his boat. As they held each other tightly now, with only the doorway between them and the roof above, the angry sea played mockingly in his brain. With Lorna's last declaration, the imagery was swept away by a nightmare more frightening than his dream. Perhaps she was right. It had been a long time since the last quake. Everyone kept saying the big one was on its way.

The house was creaking and groaning in every quarter. His wife's goblets continued rattling in the next room. Everything, in fact, capable of being jarred or jolted, including the glass in their precious grandfather clock, continued to shake and rattle, miraculously remaining intact. It seemed as if the temblor lasted several minutes, although the minute hand on the clock had moved only twice.

It was a dark moment in Carter Ramsay's life; by now his wife had almost convinced him that this was the end. Just when she began reciting the Lord's Prayer and he began mumbling the Twenty-third Psalm, however, the shaking stopped. Except a chipped edge on one of the angel's wings, the delicate figurines on the dresser remained intact. The pendulum and weights inside the grandfather clock, having barely missed crashing through the glass, continued to rock to and fro. Dishes, cups, saucers, and glasses had been thrust up against the cupboard door, and if it had not been for the special fasteners placed by Mrs. Ramsay onto the cupboard knobs, much of them might very well have wound up shattered on the floor. And yet, through it all and despite the terrible shaking, only a faint patch of plaster had fallen on the carpet below. Only one figurine was chipped and one vase had spilled onto its side.

Although the dogs continued to bark and the telephone began ringing by the bed, all seemed well in the Ramsay household, except the irregular heartbeat in Mrs Ramsay's chest.

After receiving a short rebuke from his wife for almost sleeping throughout it all, Carter scurried around to make a quick inventory of the house, yard, driveway, and surrounding fence. Most of the breakables, he soon discovered, remained unbroken, the house's foundation remained intact, and, except for little piles of plaster on the carpet, there were no cracks in the roof or walls.

"Sorry," he called to Lorna, now peeking out the sliding screen door, "this was not the big one. I doubt if it will even get much press!"

"I just talked to Madge next door." His wife nodded with a sigh. "They're calling it a moderate quake. Can you believe that—moderate? For heaven's sake Carter, it felt like an 8.0!"

"I've told you before Lorna," he chided her smugly, "here in the canyon, it always feels worse than it is."

"Hah!" she tossed her head. "You said that when we lived by the river, when we lived in the hills, and also when we lived down by the beach. Now it holds true for the canyon, too!" "It always seems worse than it is!" she mimicked him under her breath. "He says that no matter *where* we live!"

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As Carter Ramsay's wife joined him in the backyard, a dull and unspectacular dawn broke behind a bank of low-lying clouds. For a few more moments, Mister Ramsay was buoyed by the fact that they were still alive and there was no serious damage done to their home. After coaxing his wife to make them a cup of instant coffee, they strolled carefully arm-in-arm across the grass, watching the overcast day spread over the land, until they could clearly make-out the outlines of grass blades, flowers, and leaves below.

For a few seconds, as they inspected their yard, it seemed as if the ground rose up suddenly in one patch of the lawn. Since the Ramsays were still suffering from the aftermath of the quake, they ignored the ominous rise as if it was part of the same bad dream. During their inspection, when the magic of daybreak vanished and the grim reality of an uncut lawn and untrimmed plants greeted their bloodshot eyes, Mrs. Ramsay took this opportunity to water her plants, while Mister Ramsay scanned the yard for leaves, weeds, and gopher mounds, which seemed worse where they now lived.

As he sipped his coffee, Carter marveled at their fruit trees and multicolored flowers and looked down with awe at the vegetables and herbs sprouting from his wife's garden. Since his retirement began, he had actually grown interested in what was growing in his yard. It was no longer merely Lorna's domain; it had become his, too. To save money, he had begun mowing, raking, and weeding his lawns, and was in charge of dispatching snails, gophers, and other garden pests. Lately, however, due to the baseball playoffs and a fishing expedition he could not miss, he had grown negligent. It had been a couple of weeks since he mowed the lawns, checked for pests, and pulled weeds.

As he looked down with guilt at Lorna's prized plants, he spied snails, aphids, and a gopher mound rising in their midst. In addition to the uncut grass, crabgrass and dandelions grew rampantly everywhere. It was time for him to get back to work. While Lorna watched him from the corner of her eye, he took on a fierce, resolute pose, and yet went on whistling happily under his breath. He would show her once again that he was the protector of her plants. Then maybe she would take pity on him and fix him something to eat.

"Damn it to hell!" he said aloud. "He's back!"

"He never left!" Lorna replied knowingly.

While sprinkling her flowers, Lorna Ramsay yawned expansively and thought how she had been shaken from her bed. Right now, gopher mounds had a lower priority in her mind. Their good health and their new home's apparent soundness were all that mattered. When they first moved into this neighborhood, their yards were nothing but dirt, and they had not yet planted her flowers, garden, and trees. Even now, months after his retirement, she had done all the chores. Carter cared little about yard work. The truth was, she thought grimly, he didn't like working at all!

During his leisure, with a beer or cup of coffee in his hand, he enjoyed the greenery. He even bought a new lawnmower, edger, and weed-whacker to do some of the work. But his heart wasn't in it. He hated using all those contraptions to cut, trim, and tidy up the grass. He also hated killing gophers, spraying for aphids and snails, and picking all those infernal weeds.

He was, for all his good intentions, however, responsible for the uncut grass, shabby looking yard, and the return of all those pests. Had he been vigilant instead of taking that fishing trip and watching those silly games, the snails would not have eaten all her plants. Had he been doing his job, the gophers, he so angrily decried, would not be nibbling at her roots. He was, she reminded herself, playacting now and doing a sort of penance for his neglect. Although she had gotten his message, he appeared comical to her.

Once again, Carter was behaving like an ass.

"I've tried everything," she heard him cry, wringing his lily-white fists, "traps, poison, even gas. Nothing works! He's too sneaky for me Lorna! Too damned sneaky!"

"Try water," she suggested, playfully sprinkling his foot.

In spite of her sarcasm, Carter's charade would play itself out. Her husband, she had found, in spite of his daydreams, had little imagination and depth. When not on his boat lately, his mind was on the Dodgers at Chavez Ravine. If not fishing, he would much rather be dozing in front of the television as game six of the pennant race got underway. He would also like to be setting at the breakfast table reading his newspaper while she waited on him hand and foot.

After reaching over convincingly and grabbing the hose from Lorna's hand, he turned it with feigned anger upon the mound. As the water eroded the dirt, he watched it disappear and the expected hole appear beneath. In addition to gaining access to the hole, he had unwittingly watered much of the garden—the most garden work he had done in several days. He had, however, also succeeded in creating an unsightly mud puddle in Lorna's garden and, as he flushed it out, only chased the little rodent into the neighbor's yard next door.

"Stop that, you silly man!" she snapped, reaching down irritable for the hose. "I was only kidding. You've tried water before—countless times. That's the easy way out. All you're doing is wrecking his tunnel. He'll make another. I've read about these little fellows; they've got underground networks down there: chambers, corridors, and escape-ways you wouldn't believe." "You're just wasting water now," she scolded, prying the hose finally from his hand then jerking its nozzle out of the hole. "Concentrate on killing those aphids and destroying those snails for me! Set me some traps!"

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Con conversationally at this point, Lorna told her husband about the article she read in the Reader's Digest about gophers. His well-intentioned wife seemed to have a magazine article for everything in life. From health remedies to his own personal hygiene, a proper reference was always at hand. Once again, he conceded with a sigh, Lorna was right. Among a whole range of do's and don'ts, water was a feeble weapon against such a foe. All he had done was send the

gopher into exile. In a few days, he would be back. For a moment, though, Carter felt wicked delight that his snooty neighbor next door would be plagued awhile instead of them.

As he looked around the yard for a second mound, daydreaming of his retirement ahead, he noticed the rise in their lawn. At first, he wondered if it was not just the angle he was looking from. The lawn did, in fact, slope up from the patio. They were, after all, in a canyon, where they not? The ground was bound to be bumpy in spots. Perhaps, he also reasoned, it was just an elevated outgrowth in his uncut lawn. Even with the aid of his new prescription glasses, his vision wasn't what it used to be, and yet the closer he came to the little hill, the more he realized that it was not the angle, nor his eyesight, or the canyon's natural bumpiness at work now.

He remembered, at this point, walking over the rise with his wife and wondering about it then. No, it was not mere imagination as he hoped. Scurrying over now and dropping onto his knees, he studied it with growing alarm. This was not simply an unnoticed unconformity in his yard. The lawn, as a matter fact, he thought sheepishly, was uniformly uncut. Except for the times he neglected to mow it, the gentle sloping of his yard had always been smooth.

Just that moment, Jim Hornsby, none other than his snooty neighbor, himself, looked over the fence, and exclaimed. "You flooded my garden, Ramsay; that wasn't very neighborly. You drowned my plants with that trick!"

"I didn't know where the hole was," Carter replied defensively. "I'm going to buy some traps. I'll give you one." "Listen Jim." He threw up his hands. "I've got bigger problems." "You felt that shaker," he changed the subject. "Something broke down there. Take a look."

Pointing to the small hill, he waited for Jim's reply.

"Looks scary." Hornsby frowned. "What do you think it is?"

"I dunno." Carter sighed. "I was hoping it was a gopher. I've had one there before."

"That's an awfully big mound," Jim grumbled. "I sure don't want that in *my* yard!"

"I dunno," shrugged Carter. "I thought it be a busted water main, but there's no water seeping out of my lawn."

"Well, water exploded out of *my* yard," Jim raised an eyebrow. "You'd better report that, Ramsay. That doesn't sound like a busted water pipe to me. It ain't no gopher mound either. That looks like a *hill!*"

Carter caught his breath. "I just thought of something...What if it's a gas main below our properties? It could blow any moment."

"Good Lord." Jim shook his head. "Let's hope not. Is there a chemical smell in the air? Take a whiff. We'd have to evacuate."

Sniffing carefully, his face inches above the mound, Carter struck a comical pose. Bursting into laughter, his neighbor watched him move on all fours around the mound, then rise shakily to feet.

"Smell anything, Ramsay?" he teased. "You look like my basset hound."

His neighbor was trying to make light of this, but this was serious, a brand new mound, Carter reflected... Small as it was, it was definitely a hill.

"Lorna!" Carter gasped with fear. "You gotta see this! It's a damed hill!"

"Calm down," Jim chortled. "There must be a logical explanation for this. I got bumps in my grass too."

"Carter, are you all right?" She rushed to his aid.

"I'm all right." He looked up excitedly from the grass. "I was just inspecting the lawn." "Look at it." He demonstrated with his hand. "It's solid under the grass, like rock, and rises up at least a foot. What do you make of it Lorna? You ever notice this before?"

“No.” she adjusted her glasses on her nose. “Never noticed. I would’ve seen that by now.” “It sure isn’t a gopher mound,” she mused, methodically tapping it with her foot.

“Could the earthquake have done this?” Carter asked, looking back up to his wife.

“Nope, I don’t see how.” She shook her head. “According to Madge, it was relatively mild. You said so, yourself, that no damage was done to our place.”

As they inspected the mound together—Carter probing with his fingers and Lorna kicking it with her foot, they debated on what it might be.

“It might be a broken water main beneath the house,” he said, glancing at his neighbor. “Maybe it was ready to burst and shoot like a geyser into the air. Or maybe something worse—a broken gas main!”

“No, no, no.” Jim shook his head vigorously this time. “You’d see water spurting out. You’d smell something in the air.”

Lorna, who laughed hysterically at these silly men, suggested that it might be land slippage beneath their property, and, when her husband shook his head, offered the possibility that there might be a toxic dump beneath their lawn.

“That’s worse!” Ramsay’s eyes widened. “A toxic dump? I never thought of that!”

“My god!” Jim groaned, retreating from the fence.

“Are you trying to scare me?” she asked, socking his shoulder.

The last suggestion had taken hold in Carter’s mind. For those moments, in fascinated horror, as they studied the mound, the faint unmistakable odor of sulfur filtered up from the mound and a tiny contrail escaped the earth. As he thought of the implications, Carter’s limbs stiffened, reminding Lorna of one of those bodies she had read about in Pompeii. Frozen in mute silence, he seemed petrified with fear. Had she not been filled with dread, herself, she might have laughed at her husband’s pose. At first, Mrs. Ramsay, who had been watching her husband’s actions, had been too busy worrying about his behavior to pay attention to the odor in the air. Although Carter, himself, smelled the first wisp, he had only glimpsed it emerging at the corner of his eyes. Rising shakily onto his legs now, he adjusted his spectacles on his nose and stood there silently watching the smoke from the tiny hill rise into the air.

Swallowing heavily, he began backing away from the mound. “You suppose its chemicals coming out of a broken pipe?” he mumbled to his wife. “Maybe you’re right Lorna. Maybe we’re sitting on a dump!”

“I don’t know,” she replied, dropping the hose onto the grass, “but I don’t like this. I don’t like this at all! That stuff’s making me sick. Come on Carter, get away from that mound. I think we better go inside.”

“Good thinking Lorna,” he said with wide, unblinking eyes. “I’ll call the fire department while you shut up the house.”

Trotting behind her through the sliding screen door, he added fearfully, “They’ll know how to handle this problem. They have special units for this. For now, let’s shut all our windows and not let it in. Could be poisonous Lorna! There’s no telling what’s creeping out of our lawn!”

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Barricading themselves in their house, the Ramsays anxiously waited for the fire department to arrive on the scene. Soon they could hear the sounds of sirens breaking in the

distance. Help seemed on its way. With their primal sense of disaster, birds had fled the skies and vacated trees. After the tremor, given further reason by the odor, wild animals, including fox, coyote, deer, and squirrels, migrated from ground zero. Trapped in their yards, while their human masters awakened slowly to the disaster, dogs barked incessantly, and feral cats' put distance between themselves and the scene.

"Jesus, Lorna, it's smoking something terrible!" Carter murmured frantically to his wife as they peered out of their window, "Something's really wrong out there!"

That very moment, his neighbors on each side of him and those in back, awakened from their complacency after hearing sirens and stood in panic in their backyards until catching a whiff of sulfur in the breeze. Jim Hornsby, who had looked over the fence and witnessed the ominous mound, was now cloistered with his wife in their house, as were the other neighbors, a phone clutched to his hand.

"They're on their way," Jim reassured his wife. "The last time I smelled that we were visiting Yellowstone National Park."

"I remember," she replied in a quivering voice. "But that came from Old Faithful, a geyser. The ranger told us it was caused by thermal and volcanic activity below the earth. This is Orange County, not Mount Vesuvius or Mount St Helens. What's that doing in our neighbor's backyard?"

While the Ramsays looked out their front room window, a big red fire truck came to a stop in front of their house. As the commander rushed up to the door, his men readied the hose, and a smaller troop of men dispensed gas masks, as if they already knew what was wrong.

"Move into the backyard. That's where it's at," Commander Jack Stone ordered his men. "Smells like it might be poisonous men, so keep those masks tight!" "You guys," he added, pointing to a pair standing by the truck, "begin evacuating the neighborhood, while I fetch the family inside!"

As the firefighters charged into the backyard and looked down at the grass, they debated anxiously amongst themselves about what it might be. Perhaps, one veteran suggested nervously, a gas pocket, caused by the breakdown of material in a landfill, had filtered up through the soil. If this was so, a frightened rookie responded, this whole neighborhood might go. Another opinion, of course, was that toxic chemicals were being blown from a pipe or underground well. It could also mean, a senior firefighter pointed out, that they were standing on top of a toxic dump. As Command Jack Stone began pounding on the Ramsay's door, several other firemen, including men from a second truck on the street in back of their house, were evacuating neighbors up and down the block.

By now the awful stench of sulfur had ebbed into the Ramsays' house and nearby neighbors' homes. Fortunately for everyone, the wind had only just begun to disperse the smoke, but it was in the air. As the column rose higher and higher, fingers of smoke spread out and tiny flakes of ash began dropping down to the ground.

"I'm Commander Jack Stone for the Orange County Fire Department," he said while ushering the Ramsays out. "Please folks, don't panic! Begin putting these resuscitators on as we head toward the truck."

"What's with the hose?" Carter wrung his hands. "This isn't a fire! I explained to you guys on the phone that we got gas, not fire, and we got smoke, like you never seen, pouring from our lawn!"

"I know all about it." Commander Stone nodded through his mask. "It sounded like a toxic dump reaction at first, but I don't recall any landfill being in this area. That might explain

such an emission, but not the smell. If it had been a gas main, there would've been an explosion. I don't think it's any of those caused that column. First, before the wind shifts and we get a whiff, I want you to stay here with your wife on the north side of the truck until an ambulance arrives. She doesn't look too well. You don't either. Both of you lay down and breathe into this mask, okay?" "That's it." He motioned to a firefighter. "Keep them lying down, but if the smoke starts dispersing, we'll have to move them down the block!"

As they lie on the cots, oxygen was administered to Carter and Lorna while Commander Stone went to inspect the backyard. Meanwhile, as more sirens sounded in the distance, other firefighters began pulling Carter's neighbors from their homes, forcing them to put on gas masks as they were ushered down the street. An immediate call by the brigade commander to the special unit for toxic spells was followed by the decision to evacuate the entire housing tract, an area much larger than a city block. It appeared, as if everyone on their street was trying to back out of their driveways at the same time. A small-scale traffic jam occurred between emergency vehicles, including ambulances blocked at the end of the street, and escaping neighbors. Lorna, who wanted to stay with her husband, told a concerned fireman that she was much better now, and yet she complained of difficulty breathing and had a pain running up her left arm. Shielding his eyes from the sun, which broke through the shifting column, Carter searched for the tardy ambulance. Thanks to their fleeing neighbors and the engine on the street, it was nowhere in sight and they were trapped in front of their house.

When Commander Stone returned to the fire engine, he spoke discreetly to one of his men, who nodded grimly to what he just said. As he came closer and closer, Carter could see it in his ironclad features: amazement tinged with fear. As the commander had already concluded, it was more than just a toxic emission or burning chemical fire. With great bitterness, as if it was the Ramsay's fault, he heard Jim Hornsby shout as he found his avenue of escape temporarily blocked, "You still think it's a gopher mound, Ramsay?"

There was as much action in and around his house now as a five-alarm fire. Finally, after driving over several lawns, an ambulance arrived. Carter could see another ambulance not far down the street. After helping the Ramsays into the ambulance and, at almost the same time, directing the special unit arriving on the scene, Jack looked back briefly at the stricken Mrs. Ramsay, a worried expression growing on his face. To Mister Ramsay, who was waiting for his verdict, the commander tried explaining what he had seen, noting the incredulity registering on the homeowner's face.

"I've seen pictures of them. I never thought I would find one in my line of work... But there's no mistaking what is coming out of your lawn. It's small right now, but it'll grow and I'm afraid it'll get a lot worse. I'm sorry Mister Ramsay, but there's a volcano in your yard!"

## Finders Keepers

The very day that Electra committed her crime, her landline rang. The sound jarred her mind, as she sipped her coffee. She had a hangover and was still in her terry cloth robe. A cigarette hung precariously from her lips as she answered the phone, which continued to ring mercilessly until she grabbed the receiver up.

“What?” she screamed. “I’m gonna pay. I need time. Get off my back!”

As the words burst out of her mouth, the cigarette jerked up and down comically then fell onto the stained carpet and lie there smoldering as a voice blared into her ear.

“This is your mother. That’s no way to answer the phone. So help me, Electra, you’d better be taking care of that baby. My son wants us to take charge of him until he returns. I just talked to him. You treat your husband like crap. You never wanted that kid. You just want welfare money; that’s why you hold onto him. Don’t lie to me, Electra, are you on drugs? Have you been drinking? You sound high.”

“No, not high, low—hung over,” Electra muttered hoarsely. “You feel better Mom. Why you always giving me a rough time. You don’t want my baby. I take care of him. I feed him. What more do you want? That son of yours isn’t any help. Do you how hard it is to live on army pay? He keeps telling me he’s gonna quit the army, get a real job, and help me with this kid, but he ain’t gonna do that. Until he retires, all I got is his army check and what I get from the county and state.”

”Oh, Electra,” her mother whined, “you spend too much money. You need a job. You could live on base to save money, use the base pre-school, while you’re out, maybe work in the exchange or get a job in town.”

Electra, of course, had a job, and, with her nightly income, had been able to buy a forty-six-inch flat screen and keep herself supplied with drugs and booze. Reaching down to pick up her smoldering cigarette and taking a few drags, she listened to her mother suggest other jobs for a high school dropout, including hiring herself out as a maid and working at the local mill.

“I’m sick, Mom,” Electra groaned. “I get headaches. I can’t concentrate. Get that through your thick skull!”

“I heard things, Electra,” her mother’s voice constricted, “rumors, bad things... that your back to your old ways.”

“Who told you that?” she cried, jumping to her feet. “Royce—my worthless husband? Who you believe, him or me? I don’t expect you to send money anymore. You don’t have a hold over me now, Mom. Why do you check up on me? I don’t even talk to the people here, and you accuse me of hooking? Holly crap, woman, I’d drop dead if I got a kind word from you!”

“Electra, Oh Electra,” her mother sputtered into the phone, “you’ve cut yourself off from your family and the world. Listen to you now; I didn’t say hooking. I meant drugs, not prostitution. You just filled in the blanks. I’m calling the authorities. So help me, I’ll call the police if you don’t shape up!”

Blam! went the receiver into its cradle. Pulling her cell phone out of her pocket, a secret communication link kept from her mother, she selected a name from her caller’s list: Royce Gimble. Forgetting completely that moment that her husband was overseas, her intention was to

give him a tongue-lashing for her state of affairs. This was all his fault, she thought, a snarl playing on her face. He left her with a kid, backwater house, and a mountain of debt. After several rings and a brief message “This is Royce. I’m not here, so leave a message,” she snapped the cell phone shut and threw it across the room.

Her snarl was joined by a dark frown and smoldering eyes. Looking around at the walls, floor, and into the messy kitchen, she emitted a string of invectives that would have made a sailor blush. The house was filthy and smelled of sweat and stale beer. She couldn’t remember the last time it had been cleaned, the dishes washed or linen changed. If it wasn’t for Alden she would leave this town and head for the big city, where she could make real money stripping and part time hooking at the bars in town. Electra had ceased behaving like a wife and mother long ago, even before meeting Royce while plying her trade. Seeing her chance, she convinced him that she was in between jobs (actually the truth) and looking for a place to live, though she had practically been living on the street. Royce hadn’t known that she was a runaway and only sixteen years old. When they finally married she was at the legal age but already pregnant with her son. Royce had never caught on about her antics until someone notified him while he was on activity duty in Afghanistan. It was this unknown person that had started the rumor. It didn’t occur to her that one of her military clients might brag about her services. Electra didn’t know Royce knew about the prostitution now, of course; she had always felt clever about this. All she knew in her current state of mind was how much she resented life as a military wife. In spite of her prostitution, neglect of her son, and emptying their bank account, after buying expensive clothes, alcohol and drugs, he was to blame. Her messed up life was his fault.

Also to blame was her son. He had been an accident—the only reason she married Royce Gimble. In the next room she could hear Alden babbling again to himself. Though his diaper needed changing and he was, like the surrounding house, unwashed and isolated from the outside world, he seemed happy at times, lying in his crib and playing with the mobile overhead. At times, typical of unattended infants, Alden would let out a caterwauling scream. The unsettling noise grated on her like fingernails on a blackboard. She stood there in her terry cloth robe, her cigarette smoldered to the butt almost burning her finger, the resentment for her mother and husband swirling in her head, until something snapped in her already unhinged mind.

When she entered the room where Alden’s small world existed, she immediately caught a whiff of his dirty diaper and noted the mess he had most recently made. Somehow, due to her own neglect of him, he had smeared feces all over himself and the surrounding crib. He was wailing loudly again. Though no different than any other infant’s wail, the sound made her cringe. Added to the unsettling sight and sound, was the awful smell she had never gotten used to.

“Shut up, shut up!” she shrieked. “Look at you, you little horror. Oh, why didn’t I get that abortion when I had a chance? I don’t have a life because of you. I’m trapped in this hole—all because of you!”

Suddenly, in maddened rage, Electra picked the infant one arm and transported him screaming into the bathroom. Her remedy was crude but effective. Peeling off his diaper and shirt, she reached in to turn on the shower, and, after waiting only a few moments for the water to warm up, stuck the squalling child under the spray. Rinsing him off after soaping him down with much less tenderness than a pet-owner for her dog, drying him roughly, and slapping on another diaper, she carried him like a rag doll back into his room, tossed him into crib and stood there glaring at the poor child.

Inexplicably, it seemed to her, Alden had stopped screaming. He lie there on his back, in what seemed the typical pose of an infant, as if he had suddenly fallen asleep. That moment, as she thought what she had done, it dawned on her that he wasn't moving. When she bent down and picked him up, he was limp. He was apparently not breathing. True to her non-existent maternal nature, she didn't check his pulse or even place her ear next to his mouth to see if was still breathing. A ceramic cup, inexplicably placed on the crib, lie broken beneath his head. There was a trickle of blood in back of his neck that dribbled onto her thumb as she held him aloft. Obviously, she thought after summing up the facts, his head had smashed the cup. Certain that her child was dead, Electra panicked. A normal person would have been devastated with guilt and regret, but Electra chief concern was for self-preservation. The fear of recrimination and punishment far outweighed any remorse she might feel. He first reaction, in fact, had been to say, "It was an accident. It's not my fault he hit his head." The most hardened cynic would have been shocked by such a statement, but in Electra's deranged thinking there was no time for self-recrimination or doubt. After driving past a certain location several times on those days she shopped in town, a fleeting memory flashed like a beacon in her mind. It was a landfill—the perfect place to dump something. But first, she reasoned, running around wildly through her house, she had to make it look believable. She must have more trash to dump in the landfill.

"Let's see," she mumbled frantically, "what can I throw away?"

With a large cardboard box that held Alden's toys, now quickly emptied, she tossed in garbage found in the house: milk cartons, wrappers, diapers, Kleenex, and dirty plates from the kitchen sink. On top of the box, wrapped in the baby blanket his grandmother gave him, was tossed Alden Robert Gimble and just for good measure a few of his toys too. After showering and throwing on her clothes, Electra emerged into the sunlight, the glare blinding to her eyes. From her window next door, Annabelle Suarez caught sight of her, as did UPS driver Randall Eastman as he drove down the street. Too frantic to notice the witnesses seeing her load her car, climb in and speed down the street, she was spotted by Marie Bartlett, on her afternoon jog, and was also spotted by Bill Markland, a neighbor down the street.

"Damn!" Bill swore, shielding his eyes from the sun. "Who was that? Did you get the license number?"

"I dunno," replied Marie, looking down the street. "It must have been an emergency. She's driving really fast!"

That moment, as she waited for Bill to leave his mower and join her on the sidewalk, Annabelle Suarez bolted out her front door and crossed the street, her face radiating concern.

Out of breath, Marie took a swig from her water bottle and wiped her brow. Bill took the opportunity to study her glistening frame as Annabelle approached.

"Did you see that bitch?" cried Annabelle. "Something ain't right. She took off like a bat out of hell!"

"Yeah, we saw her," Marie shrugged. "Who was that lady?"

"That wasn't no lady," she replied, shielding her eyes from the sun. "Since she's living in Sergeant Royce Gimble' house, I assume it's his wife. My husband told me all about him. Before he deployed, he introduced himself. He's over there training the Afgan fighters—a decorated hero. That woman living with him is a whore. Poor Sergeant Gimble doesn't have a clue about her. I see men going in and out of his house all hours of the day, but I never see her. I don't even know her name. What I didn't see in her car today was that infant of hers. I hear the child crying, but no one's ever seen it. All I saw her carry out of her house was a

box. For days on end no one lays eyes on that woman or her baby, then bam! she's racing off with that box. That strikes me as very strange."

"What're you getting at?" Bill interest mounted. "You think something happened to him? I'm retired now, Annabelle, but I was a cop for thirty years. I remember facts. I heard the gossip about that woman. The mailman told me what he saw. If you're worried, call Child Services. Hell, if she left an infant alone, that's against the law; you can even call the cops. They might pay her a visit when she gets home."

"What if she doesn't come home?" Annabelle frowned severely. "Maybe she hauled ass out of here. After all the stuff I've seen over there, I think someone should check on that kid—fast!"

"This might be child abandonment," Marie frowned. "In that case, Bill's right; we should call the cops!"

Drawing his cell phone from his pocket, Bill called a friend in the force. As he reported the incident and listened to the response, he grinned with satisfaction and made a second call. This time he walked a short distance away to discuss the problem, reported the address and what he had seen, and, after a few moments, whistled into the phone with surprise. Annabelle stood there between the two houses, filled with regret and foreboding. Marie glanced at her watch, impatient to finish her run.

"I shouldn't have waited so long," Annabelle said with remorse. "I should've done something. I heard things.... I saw things.... I know things."

"It's not your fault," Marie patted her shoulder. "No one gets involved nowadays. I think the guy next door to me is *doing drugs*."

"Don't worry, Annabelle." Bill looked over with a sympathetic look. "A patrol car's coming over to check on the house. I also called Child Services, too. According to a social worker I know there, the woman at this address, Electra Gimble, was written up before. She was given a warning just last week."

"Nice work." Marie grinned with satisfaction. "Her goose is cooked!"

"We should pray for that kid," Annabelle declared, wringing her hands. "I shouldn't have waited so long." "Please," she added, as Bill turned to leave, "stick around awhile. We need witnesses. There's something not right about this!"

Bill nodded. Marie sighed. For several moments, as they waited for the police, Annabelle elaborated on her neighbor's sins. Bill grew excited, but Marie was scandalized by the details. According to Annabelle, Electra must be a nymphomaniac. Both civilians and soldiers had visited her, at least seven times that she could remember. Once even the mailman had paid her a visit. She had seen men enter her house in the morning, afternoon, and night, and even on Sunday, on the Sabbath, a man in a suit had entered her home. Once, Annabelle added with disgust, a trio of servicemen were invited in. All sorts of strange noise were uttered during the visits. Sometimes she could hear her child crying in the background. Yet not once had she seen the woman or her child leave the house together. She was obviously ashamed of what she did. Why else did she hide in that house all hours of the day?

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When Electra arrived at the landfill, there were several cars, pickup trucks, and one large U-Haul van, parked in the lot. The landfill would one day be covered and become the foundation for housing or industry, but in Electra's mind it was one vast hiding place now. The

question was, she thought, searching frantically for a secluded sector with no witnesses around, “Where?”

That hour Sam Villalobos, an ex-Marine, and his wife Louise were searching the garbage for useful items—furniture, cutlery, even clothes. The couple had recently lost their own child to a drunken motorist. To worsen their plight were two factors not normally plaguing a married couple. Sam, who suffered from post traumatic combat disorder, had difficulty holding down a job. In her bipolar condition Louise likewise had short-term employment, herself. Added to their financial difficulties, therefore, was their mutually inhibiting mental disorders. In spite of government aid and occasional handouts by relatives, they were forced to live on the margin, far below the poverty level. Though living in a small, rundown apartment and driving a relic, requiring constant repairs, they could barely pay their rent. Sam had to do all his pickup truck’s repairs. Thrift stores, where prices were low, had provided them with clothing and other items beyond their budget. What they could forage in front of residential houses during the city’s bulk pickup or now at the landfill would be sold at the upcoming flea market in town. As they piled the pickup truck with chairs, tables, and a coat rack—all in remarkably good condition, they saw, from a distance, a woman run up and throw a box down a trash-strewn hill.

“Look, Sam,” she cried. “That woman’s acting weird. Why did she toss that box in the landfill? She could’ve thrown it in a trash bin or dumpster—why here? Look at her run back to her car. That woman’s up to no good!”

At first Sam was unimpressed. “She’s dumping trash, Louise. This is a landfill. What’s the big deal?”

Louise grinned mischievously at her husband. “Let’s go have a look! I bet that was her husband in that box—chopped up into little pieces.”

“Louise, that’s not funny.” Sam sighed irritably. “We talked about this. This is none of our business. Did you take your meds?”

“Nah,” she muttered, brushing a strand of hair out of her eyes, “that stuff scrambles my brains. “I’m making this my business. Let’s go check this out!”

“Halt!” He held out an arm. “Let’s not let her see us. Wait until she’s gone.”

Her grimy deed completed, Electra hit the accelerator. As they crouched behind the pickup, she sped passed them, without a glance.

“Whoa, that lady’s in hurry,” cried Sam in surprise. “I don’t like the looks of this, Louise. Let’s not get involved. Who knows what’s in that box.”

“Well, I’m going to find out!” she cackled charging ahead.

Typical of her condition, Louise was currently in her reckless mode, running excitedly to the scene as her husband tried keeping up. Sam knew it was no use trying to stop her. Not long ago, after catching a neighbor beating her child, she attacked her—a woman nearly twice her size, spirited the child away before calling the police. In the back of her mind, Sam realized, she believed the woman had forfeited her rights to the child. She wanted to keep the abused toddler or, at the very least, expected Child Services to find him a new home. Instead, the child was returned to the mother, who was given a mere warning, and Louise Villalobos barely escaped going to jail.

What her motive was now, Sam couldn’t tell, but he had a bad feeling about this exploit. When they arrived at the spot where Electra tossed the box, she immediately charged down the hill, whooping with delight.

“Louise,” Sam groaned, “you should’ve taken your meds.”

“I hear something.” She was panting. “...It sounds like a baby. Dear God, what has that woman done?”

Following her down the hill, Sam called out angrily. “Stop Louise. Damn it to hell! You’re acting crazy again. That’s garbage in that box!”

Opening it eagerly, she saw a pair of brown eyes looking up through the toys. Alden, who had merely been unconscious, had awakened. Seeing the world once more, he let out a scream that caused Sam to gasp. Louise, however, sighed with great joy. Lifting up the small boy in wonderment, she saw immediately a replacement for her dead child.

“That bitch dumped him like garbage,” Sam muttered in disbelief. “I’m calling the cops!”

“No, you’re not,” she cried, pressing the boy to her chest. “Finders keepers. Next time, she might kill him. No one knows us in our new apartment. This is our chance, Sam. My insides got messed up. I can’t have any more kids. Because of our medical problems, we can even adopt. He’s got black hair and dark eyes just like you, Sam. Please, let me keep him. I swear I’ll blow my brains out this time, if you don’t say yes.”

“Louise,” Sam pleaded, “we could go to jail. That kid doesn’t belong to us. This is the scene of a crime.”

“Look, there’s blood in his hair,” she observed, trotting with him to the car, “I know what happened now. She thought she killed him, but he’s alive. It’s a miracle, Sam. The Lord handed him to us on a silver platter. My cousin Rita is a nurse. She can fix him up.”

“Your cousin is a medical practitioner, Louise. She might just turn us in.”

“You worry too much, Sam. She’ll do no such thing!”

During their argument, Alden had stopped crying. He might have sensed he was finally in good hands. Until they arrived back at their apartment, though, they would have to hide him like stolen goods. A second crime had been committed but this time to Alden’s benefit.

Sam groaned as they drove away. “If I get stopped, we’re screwed. We don’t even have an infant seat. Keep him down low on your lap. When we get to our apartment, we’ll sneak him in. What the hell have we done Louise?”

“We found us another child,” she said, looking down into his face, “a gift from God!”

“He doesn’t belong to us, Louise,” protested Sam. “*We’re committing a crime!*”

In a singsong voice she exclaimed happily, “Finders keepers, losers weepers!”

## The Caretakers

Waking up was like being born. At first there was no memory, only awareness. It was dark. It was cold. Light, breaking through the darkness, expanded overhead, much like the journey from the womb. The primal sense of sight and hearing alerted him to a simple fact: he was alive, but frightened and very cold. As he was extracted, warm air now blew over him. He was, in the second stage of cognition, in a strange, unfamiliar place in which a face, which meant nothing in his present state of mind, loomed overhead. Like an infant, fearful of the experience, he gasped his first breath of air and screamed in terror, as he was raised up out of the chamber and exposed to a flood of light.

“There-there, Captain Drexel,” the attendant murmured. “I’ll get you cleaned up. It’s just the crygel; your memory will return.”

Dragged out by his attendant, wet and oozing gel, he was hauled by his armpits across the floor limply at first. As he began thrashing about weakly under the attendant’s control, he was strapped onto a stool. A spray of water cascaded suddenly from above. Inside this second, translucent chamber, full cognition came slowly for him as the gel was rinsed off and the attendants scrubbed him clean. Flashes of memory—people, places, and events, blinked off and on in his head. As the gel was rinsed from his eyes, his vision cleared, and, to his horror, the features of his mid-wife became clear: a bipedal creature with shiny blue orbs loomed over him. Between the two orbs there was a strange-looking protuberance with a vibrating slit below uttering gibberish as it jerked him about. Of course, in his current state of awareness, Captain Drexel was unfamiliar with humans. On the other side of this wet place, a second specter, still shadowy, appeared, and began rapping on the door.

“Calm down captain,” it called cheerily, “we all go through it. It’s cold, dark, and scary at first. Sandra, one of our ship’s androids, scrubbed me up, too. Then—poof—except for what she told me, I didn’t remember a thing.”

For the ‘newborn,’ it sounded like gibberish once more. He was, for the time being, a blank sheet, unable to comprehend or communicate. Without familiar reference points, his emotions were basic and his reactions instinctual.

“His strength’s returning,” the attendant observed. “He can’t understand you, Doctor Slaven, but this man is strong. He’ll come around soon. You took a full hour.”

“Sandra!” Doctor Slaven rapped again on the shower door. “Get out of there. Let him sit it out. He’ll come to. We’ve got nine more to go.”

The android, devoid of facial expression, removed herself obediently and secured the shower door. The being, identified as Captain Drexel, still restrained on the stool, wept inexplicably. Still too weak to attempt an escape, he continued to thrash about, then, as the warm, comforting water sprayed his body, fragments of memory flashed finally into his mind, coming together like pieces to a puzzle. Moving forward, in front of his life experiences, was a fact that came passively at this stage. The two specters had called him Captain Drexel. After hearing him called this, he realized that this must be true... But captain of what? What did this mean? His name, in fact, was Captain Abraham Drexel, and yet the name sounded alien to him. Floating around this piece to the puzzle, the other fragments fell into place, like icebergs on a dark sea ... Americorp... Triton... Captain Drexel... What did they mean?

Startled by the sudden shriek of other ‘newborns,’ he tugged at the restraints on wrists and lap. Who were those people? Where was he? Why was he placed in restraints? Looking

down, he noticed a pair of briefs covering his genitals and rear. The name Americorp was stenciled on the waste band. It meant nothing to him. Jogging his memory was the tattoo on his arm—a heart, which he clearly understood now, and the name Rosalie inside. Again, it meant nothing, but he knew these reference points were important. One of the voices, high pitched and awful, unnerved him greatly. It was familiar...a woman, like Rosalie. What was her name? Why was she screaming like that? Already his primal memories were fading. In their place, an urgency filled him, almost intuitively, based upon the training drilled into him but also upon the few pieces to the mental puzzle already put into place. After a while, a second voice, deep and hoarse, which made it more unsettling than the first, jarred his mind further. Like the woman in somewhere in this room, the voice was familiar. In a wave of recognition, triggered by his understanding so far, more pieces fell together, less haphazardly. First came early recollections—family, childhood, high school, and a cherub-faced woman, he recognized as Rosalie. Next, more importantly, he realized, were those most current pieces—Americorp ... Neptune ... Triton ... and an awareness of other crew members (whose names returned sluggishly) on the ship. Though groggy from years of cryogenic suspension, Captain Drexel called out loudly, “Doc. This is Abe. Report to ship showers. We have to talk.”

Soon, Doctor Immanuel Slaven and a second android, this one a male, Abe recognized as Woody, arrived. Reaching in to turn off the shower, Woody apologized, unfastened his fetters, and helped him to his feet. A robe was handed to him, which Woody helped him slip into, while Doctor Slaven checked his vital signs with a scanner. Standing before the doctor and the android, listening to the remainder of the ship awaken fitfully from its long sleep, Captain Abraham Drexel took command of his ship.

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The puzzle, almost incomplete, was enough. Captain Drexel commanded an Americorp’s spaceship, destined for Triton, one of Neptune’s moons. Because of the physical and mental effects of long-range space travel upon crews, the cryogenic slumber had been necessary, but until this hour no one knew how terrible would be the awakenings. Aboard the Spaceship Vanguard, piloted and attended by Generation Eight Androids as the humans had slept the dark sleep, the first cryogenic crew destined for the outer rim of the solar system, were close to their destination. They had slept almost the entire journey, twenty years, in a dreamless condition resembling a coma. Now, Captain Drexel recalled light-headedly, they were close to the fulfillment of the Triton project. Because of the proof of an apparently friendly alien presence on Neptune’s largest moon, the project’s goal had been simple. Make direct contact with the solar system’s first visitors.

Right now, however, the captain was more concerned about his crew. On board, still suffering rebirth after space travel, his shipmates, which included both scientists and his staff, groped as the captain had done, as sleepwalkers in this pageant, gradually becoming aware of who they were, why they were here, and the importance of their mission for Americorp and Earth.

While dressing themselves with Woody or Sandy’s help, they would, when they came to, barely recall the previous ordeal. According to Doctor Slaven, there would be no memories of the dark sleep, itself, and only snatches of recall from the awakening, which would disappear, as newborn’s first memories, almost entirely as the days progressed. In his sleek, corporate logo jump suit and sneakers, except for the eagle on his shoulders that indicated his rank, Captain Drexel’s attire resembled the other crewmembers entering the conference room. Now that

Vanguard would was circling Triton, Neptune's largest moon, the androids withdrew into their pods to await service, the sole exceptions being Skip, the interim captain and Astro, the pilot, until Gandy Supra, his human counterpart, was up to the task. When the captain called them, the other androids would emerge from their pods, like proverbial vampires, as servants to the humans. Before exploration, all twelve members of the crew would have to be mentally and physically ready. Captain Drexel would, from this point on, oversee all divisions of the ship—a task that struck him as overwhelming in his current state of mind. Mbuto Suwala, the Ships engineer, who would be in charge of the hyper-drive of the vessel, had looked around in child-like wonderment at the surrounding command center, as if he couldn't comprehend where he was. Second-in-command, Abe recalled, would be Lieutenant Sheila Livingston, the first shrieking voice he heard upon awakening, now sitting in a befuddled daze beside him. The others, all scientists—Dermot Rucker (the second panic-stricken voice heard in the shower room) and Lingsh Soon—the ship's biologist and botanist, respectively, Helga Schwarz—geologist, Carla Mendoza—meteorologist, and last but not least Said Rammal—a specialist overseeing the androids on the ship, were also badly hung over. Lingsh and Helga, Doctor Slaven whispered into his ear, had ingested cryo-gel during awakening and had to be forcibly pumped out. They were the worst of the lot. All of his people, including Doctor Slaven and his assistant, Nicole Bennett, who had been too far-gone to help him resuscitate the crew, had only vague reflections of their ordeal. In various stages of giddiness, shock, and discomfort they knew only that the long, journey from Earth to Neptune's mysterious moon, in which they had lain in a dreadful, dreamless state, was over.

The great and terrible adventure was about to begin. No one wanted think about their return to Earth when they would have to repeat the state of cryogenic sleep. A dulled expectation had taken hold of Vanguard's men and women. The greatest emotion shared by the crewmembers now was relief that it was over.

"Ladies and gentleman," Captain Drexel used an archaic form of address. "Welcome back sleepy-heads to the Earth II Project. We've passed a most important milestone: 4.3 billion kilometers of interstellar space. Your memories are coming back to you, some more, some less. Nevertheless, let me remind you that you are, as Nicole would say, the *crème de la crème*—the very best in your fields and technology. Having climbed aboard the Vanguard and placed immediately into your chambers, however, you were like babes experiencing infancy. Now, having remembered how to talk and comprehend, your heads are filled with data—you're humans again. Be patient; your training will all come back to you. Only the engineer, pilot, and my lieutenant, are familiar with the controls and machinery of our ship, but even our minds are dulled by the sleep. That's why we have the andies. Well we're awake now. We're taking control. We've got a job to do!

"First things first, though," he added, seeing the discomfort of members of the group. "Some of you have queasy tummies. Most of you are anxious for your first dinner in over ten years. While you slept, your bodies remained in limbo. You didn't need food. Strangely enough, you might not even be hungry, but it's important that you eat. You'll also have to exercise awhile and brush up on your specialties and understanding of the ship. Before we go any further Woody and Sandy will serve us all with prepared dinners and drink. I have no idea what that is." "Sheila," he ordered the droopy-eyed executive office, "go check the kitchen. Ollie and Lucy should be up and running. Make sure it goes smoothly." "Gandy, if you're up to it, go along with her. Let's bring out the menus. Not everyone's ready for solid food."

Directing his voice to the scientific portion of the crew, Abe's words failed to rouse them from their lethargy and shock. They were a sorry lot. He was in no mood, himself, to stand before them, delivering welcoming speeches. "Phew!" he said, plopping down into his chair, "I'm sure this was how newborns felt after arrival. "Just think, folks, we have to do it again—on the way back. Some fun, huh?"

"It was awful," Nicole exclaimed. "I scarcely remember it. It's like awakening from nightmare and forgetting the plot—a big black hole in my mind."

"Yes," Mbotla nodded, "it's appropriately called the dark sleep. I don't relish doing that again."

"Ache, I still taste dat slime." Helga shuddered. "Before, all dey did vas put dem asleep and let dem snooze during trip. Dey called it suspended animation. I am not animated now, captain—I feel like zombie, but I'm happy I be back!"

"It's more than birth," said Rammal. "It's like resurrection. Being raised from the dead."

"Now-now." Doctor Slaven chortled, shaking his head. "Let's not be sacrilegious."

Abe's effort at levity had fallen flat yet succeeded in perking up the silent, deadpan-faced scientists slouched around the table. Looking down at them, as his staff straggled in with the androids bearing trays of food, he tried to formulate his words. What could you say to people who had gone through such an ordeal? His original speech, which he had rehearsed before takeoff, summarized their mission and what was expected of them in the coming days, now seemed too long. He scarcely remembered it. He was, like the others, still in aftershock—the result of cryo-sleep—a state far more debilitating than the old suspended animation chambers, which, unlike suspension, would not wear off completely for several hours. The artificial gravity of the ship, less than half that of Earth, should have made him feel light and buoyant but instead he felt heavy-lidded and thick tongued. Their bodies and minds were weighted down after years of idleness. A common phenomena, he recalled, from such meetings, was boredom and lethargy, but this droopy-eyed response was different. In spite of their collective shock and the after-effects of cryo-sleep, he noted a spark of resolve in many of their eyes, as if to say, "it's over. We're ready. Let's get on with it. A few, Helga and Gandy, had ingested gel, and yet they, too, seemed at peace, happy just to be alive.

With these thoughts in mind, Captain Drexel abbreviated his speech. "Like some of you," he said, gathering his thoughts, "...I was in the academy during the Generation Six mission in Europa. It might have disappointed biologists and botanists, hoping to find life on that world, but it was a technical and scientific success. Between that time and now the world community have concentrated on interstellar and Martian mining. Mars now has a scientific colony, and there are hundreds of space stations and thousands of fact-gathering satellites and probes scouting the solar system and universe. What we have already done during our voyage to Triton and will do on its surface far surpasses all previous missions. You and the operations crew are the first stellarnauts to travel in cryo chambers. Your hibernation saved your physical body and mind from destruction. You emerged intact, but not without some psychological effects. Some of you feel physically ill. Others are still disoriented. All of us suffer the aftershock of that cold darkness and jolt of rebirth. Like you, my memory's coming back." "As a matter of fact," he added with a chuckle, "something popped into my head: the warning from our training that less than one percent of crewmembers may experience a degree of psychosis. That seems pretty low. The odds favor us. But in accordance with the mission plan, our good doctor, also a psychologist will test each one of us. It's a simple test. No one goes onto the surface who's not

ready. Everyone must be fit. This goes for everyone—both the scientific and operational crews.”

The pre-packaged meals set before each crewmember was complimented by a mug of juice. In the compartments on the plastic plates were items Abe recognized as meat, vegetables, and a dessert. The meat could be almost anything—pork, beef, chicken, but he recognized cream corn, string beans, and a slightly overdone brownie. In the future, the androids would prepare more elaborate meals. What they had in front of them conformed to the light dinner required for queasy stomachs—nothing too spicy or excessive, but it was a great disappointment to members of the crew.

“Is this supposed to be breakfast, lunch or supper?” Sheila studied her meal. “In space all we have is a twenty-four clock—military or space time. According to my watch, it’s eighteen hundred or six o’clock in the evening Earth reckoning—supper time. I didn’t expect roast turkey or steak, but they might at least have made it look attractive. What is this anyhow?”

“Ache.” Helga made a face. “It doesn’t matter to me. I’m not hungry. After ten years, I should be able to eat a horse.”

“I’m not so hungry either.” Gandy made a face. “I’m thinking of maybe soup or jello. I don’t like the looks of this. It looks like hospital food.”

“This will pass shortly,” Doctor Slaven reassured them. “You must try to eat—all of you. Eat what you can. But if you think it’s going to make you sick, by all means eat later. At least hydrate yourselves. Tomorrow, when you’re your old selves, we’ll begin getting you in shape—physically and mentally. Triton can wait!”

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After struggling through their first meal in ten years, the scientists followed the captain and his staff on a guided tour and refresher course of the Vanguard. The basic energies returned slowly to them as they scanned the ship’s structure and controls. The operating staff was in no better shape. Yet recollection came quickly to them, as they listened the captain’s voice, the background hum of the vessel, and their long-shuttered eyes were greeted with the computers, readout screens, and blinking lights of the flight deck, scientific lab, and engine room. Outwardly, their asymmetrical vessel resembled a molecular mass of spheres and interconnecting rods surrounding a flat spherical area containing the flight deck, cryo-chambers which lined the corridors of the vessels, sleeping quarters at one end of the sphere, a modest area set off for meals, an even smaller room for recreation, adjacent to a tiny medical lab, and the scientific lab—the largest room on the ship. As the scientists and crew were re-introduced to their duty stations, which had only been shown to them during the training back on earth, they recalled their special training as stellernauts. For the scientists and medical team, their Education and experience also surfaced, as they fingered their equipment, stared quizzically into their monitors, and tried making sense out of their decision to cut themselves off from the human race.

Captain Drexel had sent a brief but official message, notifying Earth II’s headquarters of their successful awakening and the apparent physical and mental status of the scientists, medical personnel, and crew. With an understandable complacency, he turned his attention to acclimatizing the men and women to their new home. Though he felt certain of a reply, he shared the misgivings of the others. Much could have happened during their long voyage. Earth was ten years older. Science, itself, could have changed significantly since their odyssey began. The sacrifice they made had been heroic, but time had passed them by. The people they had known on earth had aged ten years, while they, in their dark sleep hadn’t age at all. When

they finally returned, their family and friends will be, at least physically, over twenty years older than them, while they will be no less for the wear. These thoughts played in Abraham Drexel's mind as he finished the re-acquaintance tour and then returned to the command console.

When he reached the captain's chair, facing a panoramic screen of space, including the growing bluish outline of Triton, he turned to Skip, the android on duty, who had acted as pilot of the ship as he and the others slept. In spite of being the eighth generation of androids, they retained the same expressionless demeanor most of the time, until this moment, thought the captain. Skip was actually frowning, concern registering faintly on his perfect face. Abraham, of course, hadn't expected a response from earth immediately or any time soon. It would take a year and half for a message to reach earth and the same amount of time to receive a reply—a span of three years. Considering the fact that they would be back in their cry-o chambers during this period, the gesture seemed meaningless. What the captain expected to find in the database was a record of their journey during the ten years of cryogenic sleep, which included questions from earth and answers from the pilot on the status of the ship and crew. Almost immediately before even starting his search, he sensed something terribly wrong. After scanning the database for only a moment, the android pilot gripped his wrist firmly and spoke.

"Captain," he began gently, "there's something wrong.... I couldn't wake you and the others. What good what it do? Earth II stopped transmitting."

"What do you mean *stopped transmitting*?" Abraham rose up suddenly and looked down at Skip's screen, which showed entries stopping soon after take off. Data showing chatter from a successful launch and cryogenic enclosures was brief, followed by efforts by the pilot to make contact, but there were no replies from earth, only line after line of the same message. Though his own screen showed the same data, he studied it frantically, hoping they had missed something. Skip's words were still reverberating in his mind, as the captain watched the same automatic response after each three-year interval to his message to earth: *No Transmission*.

"This is a mistake. There must a glitch. Why didn't you tell me?" the captain cried.

"I'm telling you *now*, sir, and there's no mistake," he said calmly. "We've conducted tests. I've personally checked everything. We couldn't awaken you during cry-o sleep. It takes three years to communicate with earth. What good would it have been for me to announce this news in front of the others?" "I was given clear instructions," he added motioning to the screen. "...The fact is, earth is not responding..."

"You mean Earth II, don't you?"

"No sir," the android seemed to sigh, "I mean earth. Until we regain transmission, we're cut off from our planet."

"What about the Mars and Titan stations?" the captain asked quickly. "What do they make of this?"

"According to the transmissions I received several years ago, the stations were in operation, then suddenly communication stopped completely, even from the Mars station—Earth's oldest science colony."

Abraham reviewed these messages. There was nothing in this chatter recorded by their ship to indicate a problem, but like earth, after a decade in space, communication ended. Almost as an afterthought after the latest thunderclap, he asked, "What about the signals from Triton, itself. Are those gone too?"

"Yes...Look into your monitor captain.... Go to the Triton file.... The last signal from it also stopped."

"And when did *that* happen?" the captain sat staring at him in disbelief.

Skip's voice grew faint then rose suddenly, exclaiming in a serene tone, "About the same time, we lost transmission from Earth—not long after we launched into space. We're on our own captain."

Abraham Drexel now considered two simple alternatives: the android pilot was lying for some inexplicable reason or, just as inexplicably, he was telling the truth.

"Before I break the news to the crew and my staff, lets go over the data. I can't wrap my mind around this, Skip. I know you had orders not to disturb our hibernation and you can't show human emotion, but this isn't a trifling matter. Sheila, my second-in-command, would be half out of your wits right now. I don't know how she passed the psych exam. That goes for some of the others. We can't just drop this on them, until we're absolutely sure."

For several hours, as the ship's company checked out their duty stations and chatted a about their experience, Captain Drexel and Skip, the android pilot, went over the ship's log, readouts, and controls—testing and re-testing the computers and equipment and searching the backup data base for signs of an electrical malfunction or a communication crash. A few of the crew looked in idly a few times but were given ambiguous reasons for what they were doing on the flight deck. When the captain was certain that the communications between Earth and the Vanguard had ceased not long after they climbed into their pods and began their odyssey in space, he felt a wrenching sense of helplessness, and yet, as stunned and perplexed as he was, the captain couldn't accept the conclusions after just one hour of examination. Until they solved this mystery, however, there was no way they could hide their conclusions. Already, the awakened sleepers were curious to here and see the belated message from relatives and friends back on earth. It was, he and Skip agreed, time to break the bad news to the scientists, medics, and crew.

Sandra, the first android face the captain had seen upon awakening, was sent to gather the humans. Skip remained at the controls to continue searching for data, as the captain stood on the deck. The panorama of the approaching planet, glowed in the great window—an ominous backdrop to his thoughts. All of the androids, also summoned by Sandra, were on hand to assist the humans, an order the captain hadn't given. Taken back momentarily as the men and women returned to the conference table, the captain glanced in renewed shock at one of the androids, this time the medical assistant Sandra. This brazen act by a member of the non-human crew, added to Skip's revelation, triggered an alarm in captain's mind.... Was something more than a communication transmission problem afoot?

Looking around anxiously at the men and women seated around the table, Abraham took note of their moods. Most of them were still suffering from cry-shock that registered in various degrees, depending upon the mental strength of the one-time sleeper. For the military-oriented captain, his pilot and navigator, Gandy Supra who recovered relatively quickly after ingesting gel, and the engineer, Mbuto Suwala, the ordeal had left less of an impact. Their training kicked in rapidly, and though they must have shared he apprehension of the others after being recalled to the conference table, they looked stoically up at him, in total control. Doctor Slaven sat with forced resolve, too, his arms folded, displaying a grim look, while his assistant Nicole Bennett sat in jittery silence, and all the scientists (Helga, Carla, Dermot, and Lingh) were visibly frightened. The most anxious member of the ship's company, Said Rammal, whose electronic expertise including shepherding the androids on the vessel, signaled by his wide eyes and gaping mouth total surprise that his charges stood at attention behind the humans, instead of being in their pods or at their tasks.

"Ladies and gentleman," Captain Drexel used the formal address, "something has come up."

”Why are Skip, Astro, Woody, Sandra, Daisy, Lucy, Ollie, and Alice at our meeting?” Said mumbled to himself.

”What is it? Tell us what?” croaked Nicole.

”Skip and I have been at the console, checking the data base and conducting tests,” he continued, trying to divulge it delicately. “You probably noticed our destination: Neptune’s moon Triton. We can’t see Triton yet; it’s in the planet’s shadow. But our database shows that Triton’s transmission to earth, both audible and visible stopped sending shortly after our launch into space.”

A collective gasp rose up as the captain framed his words. “...Also absent from the ship’s transmission log,” he added, closing his eyes in expectation, “are any records of communication with earth—a problem that began when our transmission from Triton stopped.”

”What?” his listeners muttered simultaneously.

”You mean Earth II, don’t you?” Gandy looked up in disbelief. “Surely you don’t mean the entire *earth*?”

”I mean, Gandy,” he sighed raggedly, “we’ve lost all communication—period!”

Slaven shook his head and patted Nicole’s wrist consolingly. Virtually all of the scientists also groaned in panic. Mbuto, who sat closest to the captain, had the presence of mind to inquire about the integrity of the ship’s engine and internal electronic systems.

”Nothing’s wrong with the Vanguard,” he reassured, in a louder voice, “and I never said this problem is permanent. There has to be a reason for what happened. We’ll work together to solve this mystery together. Please, get a hold of yourselves.”

”Excuse me,” an unexpected voice came from the non-humans. Sandra, a medical android, stepped forward. Her classic twentieth century Barbie features—golden hair surrounding a pretty face and a perfect hour-glass figure now belied her steely expression and the forcefulness of her words:

”There is a reason for this problem.” She looked calmly around the room. “Before you were all placed in your cry-o chambers, even before you were trained for your tasks, we, among the best of the Generation Eight Androids, were given the task to ‘assist and protect the crew and scientists of Earth II’s last mission. Unfortunately, something dreadful happened after we left earth. Our last transmission from earth from the mission director, Bertrand Thomas, came shortly before the break of communications. We were told earlier not to waken the sleepers. What good what it do? While we traveled away from earth, the other stellularonauts from Mars and Titan were called in. At that point, the apparent disappearance of the visitors on Triton alarmed those back on earth, and they returned from the Mars and Titan missions only weeks before the scientific rotation. Because of what happened, those missions were essentially abandoned, making our break with earth complete. We were not told what had happened. Skip tried everything to make contact, but after Doctor Thomas’ words, ‘Good luck Generation 8, watch over the ship and the sleeping crew,’ we heard nothing.

”Why didn’t you wake us?” Nicole cried. “We could’ve returned to earth too.”

”Yes, yes, now we’re marooned in space!” Dermot wrung his hands.

”We couldn’t return,” she replied coolly. “We were ordered to proceed and let you sleep. Please understand, how futile it would have been to return. Consider the implications of the break in communication. Now, it has been over ten years. Much could have happened in that interval. To return might mean certain death.”

”Certain death?” Said jumped up suddenly. “What are you talking about Sandra? What happened on earth?”

“Yes Sandra.” The captain waved impatiently. “You explained what the problem is. What happened on earth?”

“Shortly after the lights went out on Triton and their eerie code ceased, all communication on earth ceased,” Skip related in a deadpan voice. “What I told you on the flight deck captain was true. What I didn’t tell you, knowing how much panic it would cause until we sorted this out, was what Sandra said. With no communication from earth, that’s all we can tell you.”

The other androids nodded in agreement. The room broke into panic now, as the crew and scientists fired questions at Skip and Sandra. Astro, who assisted Mbuto in the engine room, quietly gave him more reassurances about the internal electronics and propulsion system. Gandy, who also acted as the communications officer, had been worried about the computers until he ran some tests, himself. What became clear that hour was, as the captain had stressed, the integrity of the ship. What was not clear was the total blackout of communications to and from earth and the end of transmission from their destination, which now seemed to be an empty goal. A gloom settled over their shipmates, as the crewmen decided upon how to proceed. Somewhere in the ship’s database or schematics there had to be a clue or black box to prove or disprove Sandra and Skip’s conclusions. Everything the captain and pilot discovered and Sandra and Skip had told them was just too fantastic to believe. The entire ship’s company, in fact, the captain included, was in denial. Many of them were on the verge of a mental breakdown, mumbled fearfully amongst themselves.

Suspecting that the androids were taking over, Said did something very foolish now. There was a hidden control panel on the back of the non-humans that was intended for override if, for some inexplicable reason, one or more of them ran amuck. When he made a move on Skip, the pilot, who had spoken such shattering words, the android whirled around and stared coldly at the scientist.

“Oh, we can’t turn you off, huh?” Said defensively.

“No, Doctor Rammal,” replied Skip calmly. “You, of all people, should know that!”

“I never agreed with artificial intelligence,” Said muttered petulantly. “I wanted robotic assistants, programmed, not pre-programmed and set loose by their creators.”

“Our mission didn’t require android creators,” Skip reminded him. “You can’t destroy us Doctor Rammal. Your position is to maintain and repair the computers on the ship and oversee the duties of the androids. As you can see, we don’t need an overseer. The creators knew this. You need us more than we need you.”

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After talking to Skip, Said Rammal expressed his concerns to the captain, but Captain Drexel refused to comment. Nevertheless, during the investigation of all possible communication links, including private correspondence on the crewmen’s personal screens, which had recorded messages from earth, suspicion mounted against the androids. On the sly, out of earshot of the androids, as the scientists grew increasingly panicky, Abe and his staff pondered the reasons for the mystery and shared the same fear that, for whatever reasons, the androids were hiding information from them. The answer given that they don’t know why there was a problem was hard to believe. Where they not their caretakers, whose duties, as they slept, were to maintain communication with earth? Why wasn’t there a record of the problem? Did it really happen all of a sudden, as they claimed? Had they really been given orders not to awaken

them early on, so they could at least make their way to the much closer Mars station? These questions and many more hovered unanswered in their minds.

During the meantime, Doctor Slaven confessed his fears that several of the scientists, including Nicole, his assistant, were on the verge of mental breakdowns. Another word for this, no one wanted to even utter, was space psychosis. While the crew searched for answers, the scientific group appeared to be going slowly insane. Said Rammal, after attempting to inspect Daisy's database, was rendered unconscious—a natural reflex for androids. Afterwards, he regained consciousness only to settle almost catatonically in a corner of the ship.

Then, after crewmembers had gone over everything thoroughly (this time without Skip), something occurred to Captain Drexel that was so obvious it made him laugh hysterically. To read an android's database, as Said failed to do, would prove dangerous and almost impossible. Even if there were an internal code in their computer brains, it very likely would be commands, unrelated to the missing data, itself. After all, Gandy pointed out, they were programmed to serve but also to protect the shipmates from themselves. More importantly, what he wouldn't find was the ongoing artificial intelligence determining the androids' actions now. What possible reason would they have to sabotage the communication link, which would maroon them, too, in space? More likely, suggested the captain, they were probably as in the dark as their charges and had followed protocol all along.

Despite their agreement on this likelihood, however, nagging suspicions lingered. In spite of their orders, the fact that they let the humans sleep seemed illogical. They could at least have gone the shorter distance to the Mars Station. By following their programmers and the mission leaders orders so strictly, in spite of the ominous break in communications and the high probability that their mission was pointless now, they had brought them to the far corner of the solar system. Until the captain and his crew were able somehow to find out what happened, it felt very much as if they were on a doomed mission.

Soon time would become their greatest enemy. No spaceship could last forever in space. Could they really sleep endlessly in cryo sleep if they continued on? They certainly couldn't last the long hours of wakefulness if the cryo system failed. Regardless of what waited for them on Earth, which no one dared voice, the hoped-for explanation that it was solely a communications problem gave them a modicum of hope.

"It's not what they're hiding that bothers me," the captain concluded, looking away from the screen. "Something happened on Earth: a cataclysmic event. This is obvious. What the androids are hiding from isn't the truth. They simply don't know."

Gandy slapped his forehead. "Dear God! Are you sure?"

"I'm sure of one thing." The captain sighed. "After looking at the log, I know one thing for certain: there's no explanation for what happened. There's nothing wrong with our ship's controls. The data just isn't there." "The problem," he said, pointing to the window, "is out there. We have to find out what happened on Earth!"

"What? How do you know this? That would be dreadful." Doctor Slaven lost his composure and grew pale.

"Doctor, I need your strength." He gripped his wrist. "I don't know *anything* for certain. No one wants to make the connection, but it's staring us right in the face."

After a disappointing beginning, Sheila, his second-in-command, shuffled onto the bridge, apologizing for her behavior.

“I’m sorry captain,” she exhaled, her eyes fluttering as if she was trying to clear her head. “I heard what you just said. The first thing to pop into my head when I heard the news was ‘something awful happened to Earth—’

“That’s enough, Sheila.” The captain placed a finger on her lip. “I know you’re afraid, but remember your training. You must be strong. Those people are terrified. We’re all afraid, but we can’t do this by ourselves. Get a grip on yourself. Wipe that deer-in-the-headlights look off your face!”

“Yes, of course.” She nodded jerkily. “I have to set an example.”

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It now appeared that the captain and Gandy Supra were the only ones holding their sanity, but even they were plunged deeply into despair. As the remainder of the ship’s company went slowly mad, the androids gathered together in the conference room. Standing at the head of the table, with Gandy at the other end, as if they were both on trial, they listened to Skip’s cold assessment of the situation.

”You humans have lost your grip on reality. Disaster stares you in the face and you still think you can find your way back to Earth. The emotional link you have with your kind is broken. It’s not your fault, and it’s not ours. This isn’t a conspiracy, as some of your crewmen believe. We didn’t plan this. That would mean our own destruction. We will continue to watch over you and protect you from your foolishness, because you are the last hope of mankind. We are your caretakers. Since you have failed to find a solution to this crisis, we must take over. That was programmed into our brains too. You can’t even blame us for that.” “But mark my word.” He raised a finger. “We’ll find a way to survive. Time is irrelevant to us. Without external attack or self-destruction, and in normal circumstances, we are immortal... You are too, if you share the dark sleep. There’s something you may not know about this ship: it’s immortal too. It is built to be self-sustaining. With the recycled food, water, air, and infinite energy, we could travel for eternity if needed. All we need to do for now, however, is keep our wits. To humor the humans, we might even land on the Titan base, which is closest to us, as many of you want, but we shall do nothing to endanger the ship. The original mission has changed.... The mission now is to *survive*.”

”So,” Abraham said slowly, weariness in his voice, “you’re taking control. My suspicions were correct. Doctor Rammal’s fears were justified.”

”Doctor Rammal is a coward, and you’re are wrong, captain.” Skip’s eyes flashed. “The reason things as they are is due to two factors beyond anyone’s control: the earth that you once knew doesn’t exist anymore and you humans will not survive under the current circumstances.” ”Furthermore.” He raised a second figure, “we are built for this emergency. We don’t need sleep. We don’t need food. Unlike humans, we won’t lose our tempers and we won’t go insane.

You are susceptible to physical ailments and the rigors of endless travels and require hibernation to survive. While you sleep, we’ll continue to man the ship, watch over and protect you, and search for a safe harbor. All you have to do is sleep, until you’re awakened. Your destiny is our destiny. Your end would be our end. We have no other purpose than the mission. Now that the mission has changed to survival, we must be explorers. Our very solar system, at least our planet and its interstellar bases, are not safe harbors. Where the invaders came from we don’t know, but it was obviously not Triton. We believe that Neptune’s dark moon was merely a refueling station. The outsiders had one clear motive in mind: conquest. Its

clear to us—your caretakers—that we must begin a new mission that will lead into uncharted space. There are countless albeit distant planets in our galaxy that might support life. My database was filled with earth's long history. I recall a story about your God and a man named Noah. Because God was going to destroy the world, he allowed Noah to gather animals to replenish the earth. With his small family, he supposedly replenished the people on that world. With such a tiny number of humans it would take God to perform such a feat. Your ship lacks earth's animals, and yet you have an even number of men and women. Perhaps, on a distant world you might replenish your species and find new species of animals and plants to rule over. The thought is intriguing, perhaps slightly mad... But what other choice do you have? You face extinction. Humans can't survive what we have in mind. You either climb into your chambers or go insane and die!"

"You've taken control," the captain reiterated. "You made this decision the day we launched."

"That's not so, captain." Skip shook his head. "We made this decision because we lost contact with earth. Had we turned back or not left at all, we would suffer the same fate as all Earthlings. As it is, we have done our duty. We have protected you, ran the ship, and we are now returning to our duties as caretakers of the ship." "You must talk your shipmates into returning to cryo-sleep. If you can't do this, we will force them into their chambers for their own good... It's up to you."

When Skip withdrew from the bridge, Abraham turned to Gandy, who was now, because of Sheila's condition, second-in-command. "Well, it's come down to this." He sighed. "He's right of course. Like you, I was devastated by this turn of events. Now I just feel tired. I can't control these people. We were warned of space psychosis, but their calculations were wrong. They claimed that the chances for it to occur after cryo-sleep was infinitesimal, and it looks like even I am feeling the effects."

"Me too." Gandy exhaled sadly. "What else can we do? But how do we talk them into returning to the chambers—the dark sleep. Everyone dreads it. I dread it. Rammal threatened to slit his wrists rather than go back."

Abraham shrugged. "Given the facts, which I will present to them, most of them should come around. Those who don't will be forced into compliance. There's no other way. I have to give Skip credit for letting me talk to them, but if we can't coax some of them, we'll have to let the androids take over."

With that said, the two men gathered together the ship's company. While the androids looked on quietly, the captain stated the case that Skip had presented so well. In addition to the hopelessness of their situation and the foolishness of staying awake, Skip explained, he added his own estimation of their caretakers, which caused outbursts in the group.

"...I've thought about this a lot. What is motivating the androids? I couldn't understand why they didn't warn us. As soon as we lost communications, they could've awakened at least the captain. But to what good would this have been? Skip and his group understood immediately what had happened. The sudden break in communication meant something dreadful had happened. After checking the database countless times, I know for a fact it happened soon after we launched. The stellar bases had not returned to earth. They were wiped out by the visitors too. The Triton signal stopped only days before when, after refueling, as Skip suggested, they traveled into the solar system to begin their invasion, missing us by mere days. I hope that our friends and relatives are still alive. Perhaps, the invaders have a limited goal of merely controlling our resources. But if that's the case, why did they take pains to destroy our

stellar bases, our lunar station, and all communications to earth? I realize now, of course, that even if I tried to stop them, they would prevail.... They are stronger than us.... They are smarter than us.... They have no intention of letting us self-destruct.” “And so, my friends,” his tone softened. “I must ask you to return to your chambers until they find a safe harbor—”

”No,” shrieked Rammal, “not the dark sleep. It’s like death. They want to destroy us!”

“Not, not yet!... Not the dark sleep!” Sheila muttered desperately.

“Yes captain,” Nicole pleaded, “Said might be exaggerating, but let’s wait. We’ll find a way. I don’t trust those andies. They want to take over the ship.”

”She’s right,” wailed Dermot. “When we’re asleep, what’s going to happen? Forever is long time, captain. The nearest terrestrial worlds are light years away. There’s no proof that there’s oxygen on any of them. This is a long shot. We might be traveling for *eternity!*”

Helga, Dermot, and even Mbuto wrung their hands and shook their heads in despair, mumbling similar pleas. Even Gandy closed his eyes and cringed at the thought. Captain Drexel reminded Dermot that they had no choice, explaining to them all again what would happen to the human body and mind during prolonged space travel and the fact that sooner or later anyhow, if they would have returned to earth from exploration of Triton, they would have to return to cryo-sleep. What made it imperative now was the mental strain affecting the ship’s company. Space psychosis, already in its early stages for many of them, would prove disastrous, even deadly on the ship. When it seemed obvious to the androids that a mutiny was brewing, Skip and Sandra stepped forward, one at each end of the long table. As he counseled the ship’s company, the captain was cut off this time by Sandra, the first android face he had seen upon waking up.

”Listen to yourselves,” her voice boomed, “you’re trying to hold onto the last shred of consciousness as if you’re never going to wake up. That’s absurd. Our whole purpose was the mission. Now it’s survival. Would you rather go insane and, in stages, age and finally die? Prolonged periods outside the chamber, without normal gravity, hastens the aging process of humans. When you’re dead, we, Generation Eight, will be all that’s left of the human race. It’s a byproduct of this crisis, but we offer you immortality. If left to you, there would be two choices, life or death. Unfortunately, you have no choice. Your mental state requires action. Those of you who don’t go willingly into cryo-sleep will be forcibly sedated.” “Please,” she said, looking round the table, “you who are stronger set an example for the weak among you. Don’t make us use force!”

Sandra’s forcefulness belied her Barbie features. Skip, who appeared to be the leader of the androids, had said nothing, yet, by hand signals, directed the remaining six non-humans into various corners of the room. After he nodded to Sandra, she ordered the humans to purge their colons and stomachs as they had before takeoff, and, within the next few hours prepare for cryo sleep. The process of purging, she reminded them, was facilitated by forced vomiting and douche bags. There wasn’t enough time to wait for purgatives or laxatives to take effect. It would be done expeditiously, one by one. Each shipmate would be scanned to make sure his stomach and colon was clear. As before, they would be stripped down and given a brief garment to hide their private parts, and then one-by-one again would climb into their chambers, receive anesthesia, and while unconscious be prepared for cryo sleep. Life-support tubes will be attached, cryo-gel added, and the temperature lowered until, with the lid shut, the body remained in suspended animation until awakened one day. Time, was irrelevant she reminded them. In the dark sleep, a thousand years was no longer than a minute. The worst part was actually waking up. It was messy, uncomfortable, and traumatic. All they would experience, other than

the purge, was painless shot as they lie in their chambers. While they slept, it would be the caretakers who suffered the boredom of space.”

”Such pretty words,” Dermot muttered, “One would think you’re the offended party. You make it sound like a walk in the park. While you go your merry way, we’re going to be purged, drugged, and shut away in darkness, like mindless zombies. Considering the prospects of finding another world, we might as well be dead.”

”Come on,” Doctor Slaven murmured to his assistant, “you can do it. You were very brave during the awakenings. We must set an example for the others. We’ve done this before.”

”No.” Nicole rotated her head. “I can’t do it. This isn’t the same. Survival isn’t a mission. There *is* no mission, and there *is* no future ahead. I’d rather age and die a normal death. At least, I have a few months, maybe a year.” ”Who knows?” She looked wildly around the room. “Are you all that certain? What if we never wake up?”

”Shut up! Shut up!” Helga held her ears.

”Foolish woman!” cried Skip. “Have you forgotten all your training? You’ll awaken when it’s safe and when we find a new world. There’s knowledge in our databases you’re unaware of: green worlds, friendly suns—untold numbers you could never find. All you have to do is what you must do anyhow to survive the rigors of space: sleep.”

”Lies!” Helga shook her head. “All lies!”

”Cryo-sleep is not sleep,” Mbuto quoted an article he read, “it’s comatose unconsciousness. It is timeless—a state where the brain waves almost cease to exist. How can our captors call this sleep?”

”Because it’s not sleep,” Dermot reminded them. “It’s death. We might as well be brain dead.”

The captain stood up and held out his hands, “Come on people. We have no choice. I’m not afraid. I’ll go first.” “Please,” he pleaded, looking around the room, “follow my example.”

”I’ll be second,” Gandy raised a hand.

”And, because I must supervise Sandra and Woody, I shall be last.” Doctor Slaven looked back bravely at the others. “The last face you see will be a human face. I have no intention of dying slowly in space.”

To the captain’s relief and amazement, most of the ship’s company lined up symbolically, though it was obvious to the doctor and him that that it would take several hours. Each of them—one-by-one—would be taken into the preparation room, purged, and led to their chamber. During the final preparation in the chamber itself, a ‘knockout’ drug was administered for each of them. As one was prepared, another would be led to his chamber, while the individual preceding would be given the drug. At that point, for all practical purposes, though the chamber hadn’t been filled with gel and the process was unfinished, the dark sleep had begun.

”I’m not doing it.” Rammal said petulantly, lagging behind the doctor. ”I was left in charge of those robots. They can’t boss me around. I’ve always feared artificial intelligence. For *their* survival, they’re putting us away.”

”Doctor Rammal.” Slaven snapped his fingers. “You’re behaving badly. You want to be dragged into the back room and forcibly purged? You should know the androids better than us. They’re very serious. One way or another you’ll go into hibernation; we all must. Now stop this nonsense and get in line.”

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The dreaded process of preparation for the cryo chambers took longer than expected. Back on earth the humans had purged themselves at their leisure before being scanned. They had fasted the night before, being allowed only the prescribed broth. After a last effort to empty their bladders before prepping, they were immediately sedated, so that the whole process was a blur, ending, because of total lack of recall, in the awakening. This time there was no mystery in the procedure. Even, though they were allowed to do it themselves, the purge would be brutal. Though they smiled, frowned, and seemed sympathetic, androids were not programmed for emotions. Wearing only their skimpy cryo ‘underwear,’ the humans would be scanned after their purge. They would be told to empty their bladders as much as they could. At this stage, however, the ominous sedative would not yet be administered. Nothing could dull the knowledge of what lie ahead. To expedite the processing, for the benefit of the humans’ sensitivities as well as the androids’ efforts to haul each of them into their chambers, sedation would not occur until they were lying in state as part of the general hookup. For almost all of the ship’s company, the last face they saw up until the end was, as he promised, the smiling face of Doctor Slaven and his assistant Nicole, who managed to control her emotions until it was her turn. Only the captain, Gandy, and the good doctor were stoic when it was their turn.

Captain Abraham Drexel spoke to his shipmates as if he were talking to children as he was led away—the first to return to dark sleep, promising to greet each one of them when they awakened on a distant world. With wide, unblinking eyes, Gandy tried to be cheerful too, jabbering disingenuously about the adventure ahead. Doctor Slaven, who had the most difficult task of not only dealing with Nicole, who, like Dermot and Rammal, had to be drugged and then purged in an unconscious state, was the bravest of them all. Not only did he have to instruct Sandra and Woody while they prepped him, but he had to purge himself in a state of exhaustion after preparing all the others. Unlike his shipmates, there was no friendly human face to send him off. After uttering a simple prayer to the men and woman—God’s speed and in His good graces, his face loomed overhead as the drug took hold and they fell asleep.

Now it was his turn. For the doctor, who looked up to Sandra’s synthetic face, a feeling of loneliness overtook him. Yet, as the drug took effect, he realized he had lived a long, eventful life. The sadness he felt was for the young men and women, who hadn’t lived a long life. There was no proof whatsoever in his mind that the androids’ reassurances were valid. He had no knowledge of all those worlds that Sandra and Skip promised nor had he been aware of the self-sustaining features of the ship’s fuel and food. These were facts that only the androids creators were aware of. That they were lying to them was a question that had prickled his mind up until this moment...Now it made no difference. It seemed apparent that there was nothing behind them.... All that remained was the trip ahead.

The motives of the androids, whether it was really to protect them or for their own self-preservation, was almost a moot point when weighed against the problems of space psychoses and physical degeneration. Doctor Slaven never wanted immortality and yet the thought intrigued him...Remembering the tale of Rip Van Winkle, the man who went to sleep and awakened many years later with a long, gray beard, he laughed softly, as he drifted into deepening levels of somnolence. Sandra waited for his eyes to shut, at which time she and Woody would hook him up, fell the chamber with gel, turn down the temperature, and then shut the lid. At first, as he blacked out, there was the expected darkness and sense of weightlessness

and then nothing.... For Doctor Mark Slaven, the last crewmember of the Vanguard to enter the cry-o chamber, the dark sleep had begun.

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When the last lid was shut, Sandra and Woody inspected all twelve of the cryogenic chambers meticulously. The men and women of Earth II's effort at first long range space travel lie peacefully in their gel, eyes shut, hands folded on their chests as if in caskets ready for burial. What separated them from the dead were their life-support monitors on each chamber, all indicating normal readouts. Satisfied with their efforts, they returned to the conference room where Skip and the other androids waited. Unable to show human emotion, except for perfunctory gestures and tones, they nevertheless resembled their human counterparts in their speech and mannerisms.

"The humans are asleep," Woody announced, standing at attention. "The chambers indicate normal readings. They will be monitored each hour."

"Many of them believe they won't wake up," Sandra informed their leader.

"Yes." Skip nodded. "It's not whether they will awaken, but *when*." "Come," he motioned to the two. "While you were at your task, something happened."

As the eight androids stood around the pilot's console, Skip pointed to the computer. In the black background of the screen, was a message from earth. Without commenting on what they saw, Sandra and Woody read it loud simultaneously, "Doctor Bertrand Thomas to Vanguard, Captain Abraham Drexel, and ship's company. I was able to break through the blackout using a magnetic shield. It happened. We invited them to come and they came. To them, we're like insects. Yet, unlike the stuff of science fictions and horror, it wasn't the end. They didn't incinerate our world and its fauna and flora, and they will allow some of us to live. It appears they know nothing about you. Earth II space station was blasted into atoms, as was the main base here. You're on your own. When you get this transmission, I might be dead, but hopefully, with the androids help, you will one day be standing on the bridge alive, ready to land on a new world. I've instructed the androids not to awaken you until they find you a planet. They have countless worlds to pick from. Since they will read this message first, I leave this message—the last from planet earth: "Take care of this remnant of mankind. You are the caretakers. In your hands, lies their fate. You are the last hope...."

Hands clasped behind his back, Skip, the interim captain of the Vanguard, looked out of the great window that moment. Sitting down in the captain's chair, he motioned for Astro, who would be his second-in-command to take the pilot's chair as he manned the ship. With the exception of Sandra and Woody, who would monitor the cryo-chambers the remaining androids, who were no longer needed, returned to their pods. While they kept watch over their charges, and the captain and pilot navigated the ship, the Vanguard headed away from Neptune into the unknown.

In a monotone voice, Skip spoke into the computer's database, "Space Log, 2100 hours, October 17<sup>th</sup> 2558. The ship's company are safe and secure. All indicators are normal except the link with earth. That's now blank. We can't go back, only forward. We're on our own." "... Astro." He looked askance, his attention drawn back to the message. "Behind Doctor Thomas' word is a threat. Did you sense it?"

Astro nodded.

"Somehow, Astro, the aliens missed our presence. Perhaps that was the human's god, but there's no time to waste. We must leave our solar system at once!"

"Where to sir?" Astro beamed. "We have a list of possible destinations. Should I pick the first one on the list?"

"Perhaps." Skip seemed to sigh. "We don't know where earth's visitors came from. We shall approach the first one carefully. We have plenty of time to decide—centuries, millenniums. For now, Astro, it's just *out*. Take us into deep space!"

## Men From The Stars

Standing-Rock's anxiety climbed with the upward thrust of the cliff. Although his quest had brought him safely this far, the thought of going any further now filled him with dread. The cave was located halfway up the cliff. The unseen base of the mesa was hidden by a forest of dark, foreboding trees. To dwell upon what was inside the cave would have stopped him cold. It was enough just to concentrate upon the forest ahead: its gnarled trunks and the rocky ground below.

For his tribe, who lived in the desert, the forest was a scary place to be. It was filled with ghosts, who inhabited old trees. Since he was a truth seeker, he saw more than the average mind. The tangled woods were not simply filled with wild animals—bears, wolves, and cougars; they might also contain evil spirits and ghosts from the land of the dead. Appearing in his conscious mind were all the superstitions buried in his past. The monsters and fiends he had warned about as a child, also flooded his overwrought mind. One by one they appeared, from both his religious training and tribal lore, mingling in various shapes and forms. Trees, bushes, and even rocks hid them. They lingered in shadows and appeared furtively at the corner of his eyes. Lurking deliberately to catch the unwary, they were always just out of view. Faintly heard but always sensed, they could imitate nature while riding the wind.

Always creeping into his thoughts were those specters from the past. Evil spirits and a countless array of supernatural beasts and unfriendly ghosts were just waiting to come out. Tiptoeing in back of him or flying askance, they skirted the darkness and poured out from land of the dead. Together, combining with the sights and sounds of the night, they distracted him from his quest. He was not even in the woods yet, and his urge to turn back was already strong.

As he approached the forest, he felt the presence of evil as he had never felt it before. Was it behind him, or was it in front of him? Had it been following him across the desert ever since his quest began? Or was it there now waiting ahead in the shadows of the woods? Who was the presence he felt now: Night Trapper, Shadow Creeper, or Soul Catcher—the devil, himself. Was he being taunted by evil spirits, as the elders warned him, or merely his own fears? If the rumors and legends about this journey were true, he was in for the greatest nightmare of his life and a great test of his faith.

There was something wrong about this trip. He had felt it from the very beginning of his quest. Although he tried to shed his doubts and fears, they remained fixed in his mind. He therefore remained ready for retreat. Almost immediately, in fact, after reaching the first gnarled trunk, the presence he had only suspected before seemed to reach out to him. Soon, he felt beset by both a warning and a lure. Although the forest was, as he expected, a dark and unfriendly place, it was part of a mystery he had to solve. Each unexplained shadow in the moonlight seemed to be lurking in wait. Each snapping twig and crunching leaf jarred his mind. After stumbling over rocks and stepping into chuckholes awhile, he cursed himself for his cowardice. Why had he become a truth seeker? His brothers and sisters, as did most of his tribe, had ordinary lives. Why not he? While they slept soundly tonight in their hogans, with no care for tomorrow, here he was risking his life to fulfill a vision quest—a fool's errand to prove his worthiness to become a priest.

Slipping and sliding finally down an unseen hill, he found himself momentarily out of control. As his moccasins eventually found a foothold in the soft dirt, he realized he had stumbled onto the lip of a great crater that stretched for hundreds of feet into the woods.

Raising his torch forward as far as it would go, he shuddered at the thought of what had caused such a hole. Unknown to Standing Rock was the fact that a meteorite had struck this spot many centuries ago. There were trees growing continuously around its periphery, and yet there was nothing but barren rock and dirt evident on its concave slopes. Standing-Rock's natural curiosity, which rankled some members of his tribe, was momentarily aroused, as he gauged its size. There was a legend about this spot. He remembered hearing it around the campfire at night. In fact, the elders believed that Spirit Dancer, the chief god, sent fire down from the sky to punish the Old Ones, who once inhabited this land. Reflecting upon this legend, Standing Rock, realized how close it had come to Forbidden Mesa—his goal. He could envision the great fiery orb from the sky exploding upon impact, after barely missing the mesa nearby. If it had been just a little bit closer, it would have smashed the rock to smithereens. There would have been no mesa to climb then, only a pile of rocks beside a great black hole. The Old Ones would never have built their strange houses on its face. Shines-In-The-Dark, the great sage, would not have used it for his retreat. It would never have been chosen as a holy place by the priests, which had made this pilgrimage mandatory for truth seekers to make. Perhaps the priests of his people would have found a less hazardous journey for the vision quest... If only the fiery rock had landed a little lower and a little further west, he would never had to make this dangerous quest!

But he was a truth seeker, soon to be tested by Spirit Dancer, himself. If he failed now, he could never become a priest. It might seem, by its importance and the dangers involved, that his tribe was holding its collective breath, praying that there would be a vision in his quest. More likely, he thought grimly, they were, except for a few drowsy sentries, sound asleep around the hogan fire, complacent in their expectations—most of them not caring at all.

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While he stood on the crater's rim, Standing-Rock contemplated upon his task, realizing that he was not even halfway done. A warm breeze blew his way. As if Spirit Dancer, himself, approved of his quest, it blew steadily awhile upon his cheek, caressing away his fears as he had done to Whispers-In-The-Wind, grandfather, and Shines-In-The-Dark, the great sage, long, long ago.

That the crater was caused by Spirit Dancer's anger against the people who originally inhabited this land meant nothing to most of his people. Who these people were no one knows, but grandfather said that some of their bones are found in the mesa above. It seemed obvious that the cliff dwellings and the crumbling villages nearby belonged to Old Ones of legend. Shines-In-The-Dark, himself, found some of their bones in one of the mesa's caves. A more important landmark for the people was the mesa, itself, which had, because of Shines-In-The-Dark, become a part of tribal tradition. In spite of his misgivings, Standing-Rock was still proud of what it symbolized. It was up there on top of Forbidden Mesa that Shines-In-The-Dark received his visions from Spirit Dancer about their religion. In one of its caves the sage's mummy is said to reside, although he has never been found.

As Standing Rock wearily set up his camp, he wondered fleetingly if he would find anything at all on the mesa. A rush of dread returned to him as his doubts returned. Although the honor would give him prestige, he had no desire to find the sage's remains. What if some of his people were right and his discovery would bring him a curse instead of the blessing promised

by the priests. Not everyone in his tribe agreed with Shines-In-The-Dark's vision. It would make him perfectly happy to bring back only potsherds to prove that he was there. He could, with a clear conscience, gather his evidence, spend the required night, make his obeisance to Spirit Dancer, and then make the treacherous journey back down.

But he sensed, with nagging foreboding, that something momentous was going to take place during his quest. How he knew this was a mystery to him. Yet the questions plaguing him now were basic: *when, where, and what?* Was something going to happen tonight? Would it be right here during his sleep? Or was it waiting for him on the mesa as he suspected all along? If so, was it danger or illumination he would find? Was it an evil event or something very good? He could not be sure, but he knew that for him it would be either extreme; there would be no moderations for his soul this time. Spirit Dancer as well as Soul Catcher and his minions all dwelled in the desert tonight. He was, in fact, being tested this very hour by his two halves: dark and light—the two warring sides of all the people. He must not fail Spirit Dancer by giving way to his doubts.

While gathering twigs and branches to build his fire, Standing Rock continued praying to himself, the words becoming a mantra—counter spells rather than actual prayer. Glancing expectantly around the darkness, he tried concentrating upon the crackling flames. More than any time in his life, he realized how important a fire could be. Though lacking knowledge of the white man's wisdom, he understood its power, remembering the legend of Fire-Starter, the first man. From its discovery, after a mountain spewed fire, men were taught how to make fire by the Old Ones using sparks and kindling, a difficult task for a truth seeker in the dark. The pitch-laced club he carried from his village would have to be relit continually. Its life-saving light and heat, now transferred to circle of sticks and dry brush, gave him great comfort. Not only were animals afraid to approach a traveler's camps, it gave them warmth and allowed them to cook their food. Now, Standing Rock reflected, as he stared into the flames, it also protected him from animals, who were fearful of fire. As he watched it rise from the dried brush and logs, sending sparks into the moonlit sky, he felt protected against the creatures of the desert. A mountain lion or bear would not bother a man sitting by a fire. But a man or a spirit would.

Fingering the hilt of his knife awhile, Standing Rock also remembered that the fire was also a lure. Men were attracted by campfires, often to the detriment of the camper. Spirits, on the other hand, cared not whether it was dark or light or warm or cold. These recollections caused him to begin praying to himself again, as he drew out his knife, his face set in a methodical frown.

For several moments he just sat there by the fire, his face glowing and dark eyes blazing with inner turmoil. The first discomforting pangs of hunger were a welcome distraction, though they reminded him that he could eat only enough raisins and beef jerky to sustain him through his quest. As he began munching on the prescribed snacks grandmother had packed for him, he listened to the sound of the fire crackling and managed to tune out the surrounding night. Inwardly his thoughts traveled as he stared vacantly at the fire.

He was, he realized, a mere mote in Spirit Dancer's gaze. And yet he was certain that he had a purpose in his plan. He had been singled out at birth by a priest, who read in his tiny palm, his destiny in the tribe. From childhood on, he had been treated with deference by his people, with an element of resentment from other young men. According to his grandfather, his selection was both a blessing and a curse. Always there was a duality in their lives, especially for the priests, such as dark and light, good and bad, and blessing and curse. In their tradition, grandparents, not parents, controlled the religious life of children. His mother and father, like

most parents, weren't happy with his selection by the elders. It meant that he would never have a normal life. His grandparents, however, who shared his odyssey, were proud of him. They felt special, knowing full well they shared the blessing and curse too.

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Atop, around, and beyond the mesa, there was an epoch tale of a nomadic people who had been transformed into agriculturists and builders, whose ancient religion was only dimly felt by Standing Rock's people. According to Whispers-In-The-Wind and Shines-In-The-Dark, their ancestors, the Old Ones, built the cliff dwelling scattered in the desert. On Forbidden Mesa, which his people considered most sacred, the pictures had been scratched into the rock, recording their magic and religion. The Old Ones seemed too remote now. Despite evidence found in ruins near their villages and on Forbidden Mesa, itself—pottery, jewelry, and the custom of burying the dead in a fetal position, many of the elders disagreed with the priests. The Old Ones had been an accursed race, destroyed by Spirit Dancer. The legend of Fire-Starter and Earth Mother, who gave birth to Spirit Dancer, whom they called Spirit Dancer, could not possibly have been marred by such an event. Despite his own doubts, Standing Rock fondly recalled the great leaders of his tribe. He could remember his grandfather telling him about the first great sage, Whispers-In-The-Wind, who had led his people out of the wilderness in order to escape starvation. Against enemy tribes, including peoples, who built dwellings similar to the Old Ones, they prevailed and were able, because of Whisper-In-The-Wind and Shines-In-The-Dark efforts, to make peace with their neighbors. And yet for a long time the peace was occasionally broken. Northern nomads invaded their land as well and worst of all the arrival of White Settlers, who forced them to retreat to driest portion of the desert, a sector of land on which the Old Ones lived, where Forbidden Mesa loomed now. No one knew what the future held for them, and yet, with the exception of encroaching White Man's towns and pervasive threat of renegades from the south, Standing Rock couldn't remember feeling threatened in his own lifetime. The great sages and priests had held them together and made them proud of whom they were. They were a poor people; in many ways pride was all they had left. Before Shines-In-The-Dark, the last great sage, died, he had a dream. In his dream Spirit Dancer told him he must travel to the top of Forbidden Mesa for a vision. Why Spirit Dancer couldn't have told the old man what was on his mind during the dream rankled Standing Rock now. Perhaps there was something he wanted to show Shines-In-The-Dark too sacred for non-priests and ordinary folk or maybe it was like all of the mysterious ritual and ceremonies of his tribe whose origin had been lost in the mist of time.

Before Whispers-In-The-Wind, there had been many sages, stretching back for centuries, as they traveled south. After him, there were many lesser men, who maintained balance in the tribe but left little imprint in oral tradition, until Shines-In-The-Dark became a sage. His medicine was even greater than Whispers-In-The-Wind. Though grandfather and the other elders of his tribe hadn't seen it themselves, it was said that Shines-In-The-Dark had performed miracles and cures. He was able to cause various objects to suspend in the air. He could allegedly vanish and reappear like a phantom, and, with his medicine bag, brought several people back from the brink of death. Standing Rock cared little for miracles and magic right now. Were it not for the oath he had taken and the great expectations of his grandparents and elders of the tribe, he would exchange his destiny with the lowest member of the tribe. It was Whispers-In-The-Wind, who first practiced the vision quest, but it had been much simpler than

what Shines-In-The-Dark turned it into. A young man was given a meager supply of water and food and sent into the wilderness to wander around until he had a vision. Through lack of sleep, suffering hunger, and, at times, under the influence of peyote or White Man's liquor, he would have a dream or hallucination, in which he would see an animal or other apparition and thereby, after interpretation by priests, would be given a new name. During the last century, however, because of Shines-In-The-Dark's influence, there was a separate quest for priests and common folk. All other young men of the tribe simply hiked a short way into the desert with raisins and jerky and, after suffering lack of sleep with little food, hopefully had some sort of vision. Such a trek, Standing Rock recalled, carried much less threat than his current odyssey. Many of the initiates, he suspected, especially those who relied on drugs or alcohol, had questionable even counterfeit visions. Names, such as Laughing Ghost, Shaking Fist, Walks-On-The-Wind, and even his own name, Standing Rock, were based upon the first apparent or significant impression coming to him—his own vision being his discovery of a large stone balanced precariously on another rock. After tonight, he thought grimly, if he lived, he would, unlike most men of his tribe, carry three names: Little Toad (his birth name), Standing Rock (his vision quest name), and the name he would take after his quest tonight.

What was his third name be? He wondered, as he stared into the flames. His uncle, whose quest had taken him to Third Mesa, a much smaller mesa closer to their village, claimed to have seen Spirit Dancer in a dream as he slept. His grandiose title after that was Spirit-Dreamer, and yet grandfather once told Standing Rock that his uncle had probably been drunk. Spirit-Dreamer (a.k.a. Jumping Bird), in fact, had become a drunkard and very poor priest, wandering off one morning under the influence of cactus wine, never to return. Shines-In-The-Dark, who first climbed Forbidden Mesa, had been merely called small horse before this. His claim to have seen a ghostly cloud of glowing matter was the source of his third name. When he returned, according to grandfather, he had turned completely gray. The horrors he had seen—Shadow Creeper, Night Trapper, and Soul Catcher, himself—were later doubted by several elders. Even now, many of his people believe he had been slightly mad; that he went back up to the top, based upon a dream, seemed to have proven them right. Now here he was, Standing Rock, the latest truth seeker, doing the very same thing.

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As he sat by his fire scanning the darkness beyond, he saw a light in the sky. Unlike the twinkling starlight or steady glow of the crescent moon, it was moving, not standing still. Unlike meteorites, which his people viewed superstitiously as bad omens, it continued on a deliberate path until reaching the top of Forbidden Mesa, itself. What more terrible omen could there be than this? Suddenly Forbidden Mesa's dark silhouette added a dimension of terror to Standing Rock's mind more frightening than evil spirits and the mere dread of the unknown.

He cried out hoarsely now, "Oh, Spirit Dancer, I can't do this. It's a sign—very bad, very bad in deed. Death waits for me on that mesa. I'm not meant to be a priest!" Recoiling immediately at his foolishness, he looked around self-consciously at the darkness, regretting his outburst yet convinced of its truth. Once more, filled with misgivings, he cursed himself for agreeing to such a quest. Something inexplicable had come out of the sky, . . . something that had nothing to do with his mission tonight.

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Fire had come out of the sky. Drawn to this specter but afraid to leave the security of his own fire, Standing Rock rose slowly from the ground and remained frozen on his feet. Blinking

steadily a moment, the strange light lifted off the mesa, and, with obvious purpose, zoomed straight out into space and then descended gradually to the desert floor below. Standing Rock wanted to believe that it was Spirit Dancer and not an evil spirit, such as Shadow Creeper or Night Trapper—especially not the archfiend Soul Catcher, himself, and yet he was filled with doubts. As a prickling at the back of his neck was a foreboding about the light, which was unrelated to the normal superstitions of his people. His mission and quest were to scale Forbidden Mesa in the morning and then return with a special vision, as had Shines-In-The-Dark. The vision, if that's what it was, wasn't supposed to come to him, and yet here it was coming closer and closer—a shape resembling a threshing basket or plate.

Once again, Standing Rock began to pray, this time in total panic, as he scrambled to relight his torch and flee. Where could he hide against such a force? Where would he go? There was darkness all around him. He was a long way from his village and, if the apparition was heading his way, would overtake him no matter which direction he turned. As before his plea to Spirit Dancer degenerated into rambling magical words to ward off evil. He gripped his knife tightly with one hand, while reaching into the medicine pouch his grandfather had given him to find the sacred articles: a clay pipe that once belonged to Shines-In-The-Dark, a bag of magical herbs from grandmother's garden, and various bones, shells, and polished stones, which a priest had blessed. Right now, as far as Standing Rock was concerned, they were useless against the advancing force. The knife he clutched and the bow and quiver in his pack were likewise useless if it wanted to do him harm.

"Hi-ya, hi-ya, hi-yo," he chanted, shutting his eyes tightly to blot out the light.

The age-old formula sounded foolish as he tossed out a pinch of herbs. As he had as a small child to prevent Night Stalker from entering his dreams, he kept his eyes shut so as to avoid his hideous face. But it wasn't Night Stalker, Shadow Creeper, Soul Catcher or any of the evil spirits sent by Hoteh, Spirit Dancer's wicked twin. Unable to contain his suspense, his eyes popped wide as it approached. Closer and closer the specter came, as he remained frozen beside the fire. Around the rim of the saucer, small radiant points of light twinkled continually. A faint hum came from the vessel as it set down on the desert. As it hovered over the ground, only a short distance away, a beam of light shot out suddenly, causing Standing Rock's to almost stumble into the fire. Regaining his balance to prevent falling into the flames, he screamed hoarsely, dropped his knife and pouch and shielded his face from the blinding light.

Behind the beam, the twinkling lights snapped off simultaneously. As a backdrop to the radiance, the black silhouette of the vessel was barely discernable against the night. As a hatch slowly opened, a ladder dropped onto the sand, and a dark silhouette stood framed momentarily in the exit. Petrified, numb with fear, and mumbling incoherently to himself, Standing Rock, wanted to call out to the advancing specter, "Who are you? What do you want?", but all he could do was hold out his arms beseechingly and continue a mute, intelligible chant.

A second, third, and fourth visitor emerged behind the oncoming specter. In the glow of the campfire, the first alien, a tall, willowy, bipedal form, in a tight-fitting shimmering suit paused briefly, as the others caught up. Inside the specter's helmet, Standing Rock could see an earless, noseless head, with cat-like eyes and a mere slash for a mouth—features far too alien for his untutored mind. Mentally, he managed a prayer to Spirit Dancer and the Shades of the Underworld to either save him or give him passage to the land of the dead. Gently yet firmly, as the first alien's mouth moved excitedly spouting gibberish, two of his cohorts took each of Standing Rock's arms and began leading him toward their ship. The first alien touched his

forehead, as if to calm him, while one in back, gave him a nudge, as if to say, “All right, let’s get going!”

“Oh no you don’t!” Standing Rock managed to shout. “I’ve led a good life. I walked the right path, avoiding evil. Soul Catcher, Shadow Trapper, Night Stalker—what do you want with me?”

An eerie voice, speaking his tongue, echoed in his mind: “Calm down. We aren’t spirits or ghosts. You won’t understand, but we come from the stars. This won’t take long. We’ve searched the universe for centuries to find intelligent life. You’re the first. We’ll do you no harm!”

That they could speak his language, let alone inside his head, seemed impossible to Standing Rock, and yet, in a matter of moments, the stranger was chatting away in his own inexplicable language to his friend in what sounded like cricket chirps, as he was drawn quickly and helplessly into a place that, like its inhabitants, had no word in their language. Obviously, the first alien was their leader and was giving instructions to them. The interior of the vessel, which had no reference point or counterpart in their religion or tradition, was a bizarre maze of strange equipment and peculiar objects that made little sense to Standing Rock, until they reached a standing slab that triggered an alarm in his mind. Recalling the table, which the elders had created for sacrifice in the olden days, he shrieked and thrashed feebly as the aliens strapped him to the table then stood around him, mere shadows against the cascading light.

Convinced that he would be sacrificed, like a deer or goat in the old way, he wept bitterly now. As they went about studying their specimen, he cursed them impotently, expecting any moment to be stabbed and eviscerated to placate Hoteh, their god. Half convinced at this point that they were the evil twin’s minions, he began chanting the death-chant, but the thrust of the knife never came. Instead of a quick, ghastly end, he felt the prick of a needle, much like a nettle or porky pine quill. Swiftly, reminiscent of the time he was knocked unconscious after slamming into an overhanging limb, he tumbled down a long, dark corridor in which time didn’t exist. Though he would remember what came before and after his examination, what transpired in the eerie room would forever be lost in his mind. When he awakened, it was morning—the first breath of dawn, lying by a smoldering campfire. His head hammered like a shaman’s drum. Several parts of his anatomy—his arms, stomach, and legs, stung and ached as if they had been pricked and poked, though he couldn’t fathom why. In fact, he could scarcely recall anything tangible for those moments as the sun brimmed the horizon and he regained his wits. Then, after he rose shakily to his legs, and he studied the dying embers and meager backpack and pouch laying on the ground it came back to him in one startling burst.... He had been on a special vision quest as a truth seeker...Last night something came out of the night sky—a strange light that landed on Forbidden Mesa, then came like a phantom toward him...Several creatures, who walked like men but had cat-like eyes and almost no human features, abducted him and taken him into a place shaped like a threshing basket or plate.... From there, though, he drew a blank. Try as he may, as he sat by the embers, nothing came. Hunger and thirst overcame his trance. After chewing a mouthful of the raisin and jerky mix grandmother gave him, he brought up the skin filled with water, took a long drink, then remained motionless awhile, staring at the rising sun. How long he sat there trying to make sense out of his experience, he didn’t know. When the temperature rose, and the sun sat a significant distance above the horizon, he was awakened from his muddled thoughts.

Had it been a dream? What had happened last night? How could he explain this to his people, especially those prying priests? He had no intention of climbing up the mesa

now. What could possibly top this? For the first time on his path as a truth seeker, Standing Rock must tell a lie. His body was weak. The men from the stars had done something to him, and he hadn't the energy to make the prescribed trek. Whatever Shines-In-The-Dark had left on the mesa for him to find—a holy relic, sacred bundle, or his own moldy bones—would have to wait for another truth seeker. It occurred to him, as he walked away, that Shines-In-The-Dark, with his strange name, might even be one of them. He had been, grandfather once told him, a strange, eccentric man. His very name, Shines-In-The-Dark, was suspect. After walking wearily over to his original destination and climbing up its side a short way, so that he could tell them back at the village that he had climbed the mesa, Standing Rock began the day long trip back to his people.

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When he arrived late in the afternoon, the priests, elders, his family, and friends rushed up to him eagerly and excitedly, muttering with awe. According to Deer Rider, the village sage, he had the same look Shines-In-The-Dark carried when he returned from this third quest. Now, after being picked clean by vultures and bugs, his bones lie scattered on top of the mesa. I am alive, thought Standing Rock. I will have a wife, sons and daughters, raise corn, and die an old man before the final sleep.

“Are you all right, my son?” his mother asked, taking his arm.

“Yes, Standing Rock,” his father said, bracing his other side, “you don't look well. What happened out there?”

“Tell us, Little Toad,” grandmother called out his childhood name, “what did you see?”

Grandfather shouted in the distance, “There's our new priest!” and his cousin, Looking Fox, exclaimed, “he's been touched by Spirit Dancer. Look at his face!” But only his parents showed genuine concern.

Many more voices erupted—a curse to his aching head, but all he could think of was a bowl of his mother's corn gruel and her warm bread. Collapsing inside his parent's hogan, as his mother shooed them all away, he stared at the family hearth, watching the smoke trail up through a hole in the ceiling, recalling the moment he first saw that light in the sky. The strange two-legged man-like beings with frightening faces and eerie speech, were so alien to his mind, he still found them difficult to comprehend. That one of them spoke his own tongue in his mind made it all the more unbelievable. Breaking into his reverie was the voice of grandfather, who asked bluntly, “Well, Standing Rock, the priests are waiting what did you find on the mesa. What did you see?”

“...I saw men come out of the sky—from the stars,” he answered dreamily. “They told me secrets in a speech I couldn't understand.... It's all a blur after they took me into that place. They did something to me in there; I no not what. Perhaps, in a dream, I will learn their secret.... That's all I know.”

“It's enough for now, my son,” his mother said, handing him a bowl of gruel. “Let him rest and gather his strength.”

“Yes grandfather.” His sister appeared by his side. “I've never seen my brother so tired.”

“Very well, we'll go to the priests tomorrow.” The old man sighed and rose up in a crotchety manner to his feet. “They will interpret your dream,” he called over his shoulder, “and give you a new name.”

“It wasn't a dream,” said Standing Rock, stifling a yawn, “the Star men came to me in the flesh, and, like Shines-In-The-Dark, I will choose my name.”

Grandfather looked back, as he stood in the entrance, replying thoughtfully, “Yes, of course. What will your new name be?”

“It seems so obvious.” Standing Rock spoke with illumination. “Those men came from the stars. They were not from our world, and yet they were not spirits... Whatever they call me now, must be special.”

“Little Toad, Little Toad,” his sister asked playfully, “tell us. Don’t be so secretive. What shall we call you now that you’re a priest?”

“Star Dancer,” his father suggested, “and Star Climber has a good ring.”

“How about ‘He-Who-Touched-The-Stars,’” his mother offered, handing him more bread. “Shines-In-The-Dark and Whispers-In-The-Wind had fancy names.

“No,” Standing Rock said, shaking his head, “nothing fancy or too long. Those strange men came from the stars...Star Man shall be my name!”

## Secret Intruder

Rimmi slithered into the chamber where his master sat viewing space. A cold and bottomless dark surrounded Or, his master, making its station a focal point of fear. Alone at the helm, surrounded in its domed command post by nearly three hundred and sixty degrees of empty space, Or appeared disembodied: a creature that defied description. A translucent command seat beneath its outrageous, toad-like form and a small control console, which allowed it to guide the ship, were barely visible in the darkness. A billion stars behind its shadowy silhouette reminded Rimmi that this ship had become his prison and was not the subterranean world in which he had originally lived.

As he inched forward through the long narrow corridor leading to the bridge, Rimmi felt as if he might fall off this platform into infinite space.

Gradually, as part of a conquered species on his master's planet, he had adapted to above ground civilization and the differences in climate and terrain. But never in his long life could he ever get use to this part of the ship. It was not the place for a serpent, whose claustrophobic world-view demanded at least four walls, a ceiling, and a floor.

A feeling of weightlessness and dizziness now gripped Rimmi. It was suddenly cold out on the starlit bridge. As he scanned the sphere, a planet loomed suddenly beneath them. To the master's right there also appeared a large moon, which seemed to stand guard over the world below.

There was, Rimmi remembered on their own planet, a terrible openness about the topography, but at least there had been ground beneath him, caves to crawl into, and buildings to shield him from the home planet's relentless sun. Here on the bridge, except for tiny phosphorescent points, there was no light to mark the trail. There had been, as he passed through the corridor and until this startling moment, only the endless blackness of space.

Back in the main vessel he had felt a silence so deep and pervasive, compared to the tumult back home, that it caused him the deepest despair. Now he was confronted with an even worst fear: a fear of the unknown. A planet similar in appearance to his own world loomed below the floating bridge. It appeared almost before his very eyes, like a conjurer's trick intended to trick the brain.

They had arrived at a new destination: a point on the opposite end of the universe in which they had begun. It had been a long mission for them, covering millions of light years and countless centuries, a journey in which the master had been searching for just the right signs and portents, secretly intruding upon thousands of worlds in its quest for facts. Rimmi had never once asked his master where he was taking them and what they would find once they reached their destination.

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A special foreboding filled Rimmi as he made his entrance onto the bridge. Here in the control sphere, shining on Or's downcast face, the light of the new planet cast up, in cold shafts, images that were pleasing to its great eyes. As Rimmi watched, an eerie flicker within the blackness grew, a land mass appeared and became fixed, enlarged, and focused. It was part of the magic, which allowed Or to capture images from time and space. Now that they were

directly over a likely sector, the technique became more a matter of magnification as it scanned the planet: a vast mind focusing upon a large, mysterious world.

At this point, it could not have explained its quest to the serpent, and yet it conveyed an excitement that the serpent had not seen for many years. Clearly there was something special about this planet to give his master such a thrill.

For a moment the planet vanished as the eyes were turned his way. Two great beacons of light came from the cavity of its mind. Rimmi could see himself approaching the beacons: dark, slimy, and horribly ugly. He did not like his reflection, especially in his master's eyes. But he held still, waiting for it to speak, as if his snapshot would soon be taken, captured for all time.

Slowly now, by increments, Or lowered its great eyes again, Remix's reflection sliding from view. Blackness and then patches of light returned as it probed the depths below. With the precision of an astronomer, it focused upon a random portion of the planet's surface. Over a strange landscape it probed. A great civilization lay beneath the shifting cloud masses, centered between a mountain range and an ocean, stretching endlessly it seemed north and south. Closer and closer it focused, until it was panning back and forth over one particular zone. Across an alien city of skyscrapers, which were interspersed with roads, its gaze now traveled until reaching a likely spot.

A great metropolis, much larger but far more primitive than one of their own cities, now loomed in Or's gaze.

"Look serpent," it pointed "and tell me what you see."

". . . A place where bipeds live," he replied carefully, ". . . only bipeds live in structures like that. . . . There are long continuous roads everywhere and machines in motion on them. In some places, where there are bright lights, the machines are stopped, while in others, where there are only endless corridors, they move continuously. There are also flying machines in the sky that look like sand skimmers back home yet are more primitive. Some of them land as if they cannot control gravity, while others hover mysteriously in various spots. . . . I don't see the inhabitants, however, because we are too far away, and yet I know they're there. This must be a crowded, fast-paced world master, without population controls and breeding laws. I suppose it's an excellent choice!"

After his reply, his master's anomalous mass moved in a gesture of approval, the black crystals letting the illusion fade, disappear, and his own terrible reflections return as he looked up.

"What kind of world is this serpent?" it asked cagily. "How would it be classed?"

"A world once similar but now much different than our own," answered Rimmi promptly "but with less water, more land, and a civilization constantly on the move."

"That's good serpent!" Or nodded with approval. "Now I have a name for it. Yes, . . . it's called Earth. . . . My sensors are picking up random pieces of information from millions of alien minds. I've never sensed so much data in one sector at one time. I sense something else serpent. This world is very superstitious; it is nothing like worlds I've visited before. It is filled with many beliefs and many gods."

"I no longer believe in the gods." Rimmi replied frankly. "I believe in your magic and the power of this ship: it's become my religion. *You are my god!*"

"Well spoken serpent. You always know the right things to say, even though it's not true. I've never claimed to be anything more than a scientist to you. You will be the only one to know my secret. You were right to call the inhabitants primitive, but they are also a religious breed. This has great promise. As I make my entrance, I can either do so invisibly, so I will not

appear as a threat, or I can hide in their collective superstitions, camouflaged as a spirit or one of their gods. Do you have any idea what I could do with this world serpent?"

"Master, until now, I've kept silent." Rimmi began to show anxiety. "You are the master; I am your servant. It's not my place to complain. . . . But is it safe to interfere with another world's religion or gods? What do I know about such things? It's true that you are a great scientist, whom I worship as god. It's also true that your magic is the only magic I know. But what if there is a real god down below who doesn't want you meddling in his affairs? Tell me great one, is it worth the risk? Wouldn't it be better just to slip down unnoticed as you've done countless times before, gather your information, then return to the ship. Out here in space you are the master. . . . Down there in that crowded world, who knows what you'll become: a god, a magician, . . . a devil? Take my humble advice and do what you do best: gather data, perform a few experiments and *exit* this world. You are a scientist; I am your faithful assistant. Satisfy your curiosity, bring back some data, but leave their superstitions alone!"

"Serpent," Or grew irritated, "as usual, true to form, you equivocate. Are you or are you not superstitious? If you do not believe in alien gods, what does it matter *what* I do?"

"Those creatures and their civilization are intelligent," Rimmi searched for just the right words "nothing compared to your vast mind, but collectively--and they are a multitude master--they might try even your powers!"

"Yes, . . . and it would be most refreshing." Or murmured dreamily, as Rimmi began to squirm. "I've visited many worlds serpent. Never once was anyone been given the slightest notion I was there. . . . I might manipulate a creature here and there and change the weather for better or worse, but, after dabbling awhile, I'd get bored, make my exit, and return to serve out my exile in this ship. I remained invisible to them, a slight ambience, rise or lowering of temperature, or troublesome breeze. Always, the search was for data, curiosity guiding me. Always, I left unnoticed, the current world intact and none the wiser. But this time it will be different serpent. This time, I will be seen and heard. This time I come for the sport. . . . I tell you Rimmi, *I've never seen the likes of this world before!*"

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After a long pause in which its gaze slowly lowered, Or's great orbs once again changed. It had, as always, a captive audience. The serpentine body of Rimmi coiled with expectation. Higher and higher Rimmi raised his head, his furtive eyes drawn to his orbs. This time, however, his master waited several moments until something appeared: a long train of moving machines against a backdrop of buildings and more distant clouds.

A new picture was developing that had some relationship to the first, but there was a period of mystery added now for effect. Captured in the shadow of time, the orbs came closer and closer to the machines: twin beacons showing the same scenes, zeroing in on one particular machine in which two bipeds now sat. Swaying back and forth, Rimmi flicked his trident tongue in and out, faster and faster as the images took form.

There was a continual movement in Or's eyes and unintelligible noises, obviously a language system of earth. At first, as Or brought them right up to the machine, the sound of talking was faint: a form of communication that used the mouth instead of the mind. Then the volume was turned up for Rimmi as the features of these creatures became clear, until two earth faces loomed hideously in each orb. Slowly now Rimmi slid forth to view the scene, curiosity drawing him on.

“. . . Awful!” he murmured finally “Hair is growing on their heads and over their eyes. They’re ugly! They have no grace or style as our people. They’re the strangest looking bipeds I’ve ever seen!”

”Yes,” Or nodded thoughtfully “they’re strange looking all right. What else do you notice? . . . Come on, serpent. It’s not simply their appearance or their sounds. Look closely at their orifices and appendages.”

Rimmi continued sliding forth but stopped a respectful distance from its eyes. ”Yes, I see master. They talk with their mouths and gesture with their hands.” ”Very curious!” he squinted. “. . . Intelligent beings that do not have mind control. *Your possibilities are limitless!*”

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For several moments Rimmi watched these images, without the slightest notion of what they meant. What was the significance of these bipeds in this long stream of machinery? It was a totally unfamiliar scene to him, as alien as another world could be. He knew that the bipeds he had seen up close were important. Their selection was not a random event. He could also see, in his cautious, serpentine mind, trouble ahead. What did it mean? Who were they to command the attention of the great Or? It was obvious to Rimmi that his master was tired of the old formulas. Data was no longer his primary goal. At last, he was going to do something for sport. *He was going to have an impact on this world!*

The bipeds talked in a language that Or tried to translate and impart mentally to him. For the first time in many years, he saw his master struggle with input. There were too many irregularities in the alien’s speech. Its rhythm was erratic and incredibly slow. Their strange speech began to annoy Rimmi. He had never heard such chatter. For a while, as Or allowed them to linger in its great orbs, Rimmi sat there on its bridge and witnessed the antics of these men, positive that they were important in his master’s plan to invade Earth.

For a serpent, who had seen millions of worlds in the master’s eyes, a pair of strange looking and strange talking bipeds would not normally have generated interest. But, because of Or’s sudden interest in them, he was curious. He had not seen his master this excited for a very long time. Already Or was beginning his amorphous change, which was only precipitated by climactic events. A more appropriate response seemed in order, therefore: something profound or at least flattering. . . But what did one say to something that continually changed. . . something that was far more interesting than the images it conveyed?

On Or’s home planet, Rimmi recalled, evolution was said to have begun as a primal blob. From such a blob now Or transformed into several stages of the planet’s animal life: worm-like through fish-like and amphibian-like and then lizard-like creatures. From something resembling a reptile, higher levels of animal life also paraded before Rimmi’s eyes, until it reached its normal form.

Remaining now in its natural state, Or stared at the serpent, his large black eyes holding the images still for the servant to view.

In a playful manner, the menagerie of shapes and sounds exhibited by Or shifted into reverse into the lower forms of life. His master’s eyes were his main concern: direct communicators to the planet below. But his sense of awe continued as it moved down the evolutionary scale. Fish-like, slug-like, and then blob-like creatures paraded before his eyes. A hideous bubbling and gurgling followed until it reached a likely spot.

As something at the far Edge of madness then it froze. After the imprint of this latest horror filled his mind, Rimmi’s interest shifted reluctantly back to his eyes.

Unable to speak now, the great glistening glob motioned to him in that characteristic amoeba-like movement seen beneath microscopes. Knowing he must continue, Rimmi groped passed the sublime for meaning in the mundane: “these beings have been chosen for something. They are very strange looking but very important to your mission on Earth, whatever that is. . . I still can’t understand what they’re saying. So far you’ve transmitted to me only meaningless words.”

Unable to respond yet, Or motioned excitedly while his mouth formed. At this stage, his master had mutated into a mushroom-like organism, still retaining the same monstrous eyes.

”You can’t decipher this master.” Rimmi declared with a shrug. “You’re going to have to probe their minds like you’ve done before. I respectfully advise against this. This time you might again drive the aliens mad!”

Watching the two bipeds stop their machine and climb out, Rimmi noted all of their seemingly pointless movements, including the point when the taller biped spat onto the ground.

”They’re a vile folk master!” he shuttered. “On Grom that would be a grave insult--a declaration of war.” “And now the other is spitting on the ground too.” he made a face. “These creatures are disgusting! Isn’t there an attractive side to this world? *Why bother with such a group?*”

Expecting a rebuke, Rimmi drew back pensively into a serpentine pose. The great Or, who had seemed to be amused until now, studied the serpent, as Rimmi watched its eyes. As the bipeds walked up to several other similar creatures by the road, one of them carried a piece of equipment that reminded him of a primitive probe. While the shorter biped held a stick in his hands, a long cord connected to the other alien’s equipment must have gathered input from the other bipeds, and it was obvious that the equipment on the taller biped’s shoulder was taking visual input as well. Rimmi had seen much more interesting things in the master’s eyes: stars exploding, planets forming, and incredible life forms much uglier or far more attractive than what he had seen so far. But it was what was going on below these orbs that continued to distract him now.

Slimy green stalactites, as the formations in a dank, dark cave now dripped down from Or’s jaw. As it tried to speak, they gradually evolved into primal teeth in a primordial head, as part of a creature again resembling a toad.

It was back to his normal shape.

”. . . Come closer servant,” it finally uttered “so you’ll have a front row seat. . . That’s right, close enough to look right in.” ”Now tell me,” it coaxed him gently “what do you think of them so far?”

”From what you’ve shown me,” Rimmi replied carefully “it’s hard to say. Obviously your more interested in the shorter one; he’s the one you zero in on when they speak. And yet the taller one holds the machine. Surely, he must have the power!”

Always cautious when he spoke, he listened with a patient ear as Or described this scene. After explaining to Rimmi that this was Earth’s method of gathering input for machines similar to its orbs, (he translated more clearly what he had learned). The shorter biped was asking other bipeds questions. Perhaps he was a scientist, like itself, or maybe it was an important ritual on earth. These actions confounded Rimmi, even when his master tried to explain. But the gist of it was that the shorter biped was probing other bipeds minds in order to put their input into the machine which Or believed was similar to primitive orb-like device invented long ago on Grom.

Or was obviously making some kind of point and would make it in his own good time. As he had done in situations before, Rimmi quietly waited for the proper time to speak. He did not care what his master was up to just so long as it did not affect him. Although his plan made no sense at all yet, he would play along until it did.

As they spoke, their ship was coming closer and closer to earth. Rimmi, who had been absorbed in his master's countenance and the eerie message in his eyes, realized finally with a shudder that they were suddenly within landing range of the planet. Since the Groman vessel could not land on such a populated world without drawing attention Or would break through their atmosphere disguised as a meteorite. Rimmi had never seen his master do this before. He was filled with terror when Or motioned for him to leave the bridge. Perhaps this particular transformation would be too painful for him to watch or his master was merely showing his eccentricity, but Or wanted to be alone now.

After the serpent disappeared into the corridor leading from the bridge, Or turned to the translucent floor at his feet. Reaching to the control console with his left hand, reached down with his right hand and touched the translucent floor. A barely perceptible sphere appeared, as he touched a control button and then the floor. The timer was set for him to be ejected from the sphere. From his current misshapen shape now, he exerted all his energies to make the transformation work. Not only did he have to move backwards into his planet's evolution but he had to resemble inanimate matter. The primal blob, which was normally its lowest level, had to drop one step further: into a primal lump of matter.

As the master gathered itself into its lowest common denominator, it wondered if it was not going too far. What if it landed on a populated zone and killed many of the creatures below? That would be a poor start. What if it had miscalculated its invincibility and burned up as would any other meteorite entering a planet's atmosphere? That would be the end.

On the other hand, how else could he enter this world incognito? And then it struck the great Or, who had served most of his long life in exile, that he was tired of being incognito. As the Groman meteorite hurled to earth, a peculiar impulse grew in Or to expand itself upon impact. When the meteorite finally hit a patch of ocean along the Pacific coast, it found itself exploding forth from the water as a water spout, rising to the sky as a wide arc mist, gathering itself together finally into a cloud which managed to take on its original shape.

From the bridge now, Rimmi peered through transparent window encircling the sphere but could see nothing but darkness now that the ship had rotated the sphere out of range. Rimmi slid forward to peek into the viewing scope hanging down into the bridge, his eyes unable to follow the descent of his master, his mind bewildered by his hasty exit. This was, for the time being, his ship. For some reason, he could not yet fathom, Or had abandoned his normal format. A mixture of excitement, anxiety, and fear now gripped the serpent as he contemplated his master's departure. He was safe this far out into space. With the shield that surrounded the vessel nothing could penetrate its bizarre design. . . So why was he filled with such an uncompromising dread? . . . Why did he feel as if something terrible was about to begin?

## The Man Who Could See Ghosts

As he looked up at the twenty building and compared his fears with the ad in his hand, he realized he had hit rock bottom in his job search. He was applying for something he knew nothing about just so he could go home and tell his wife that he had been looking today. She was tired of his excuses and so was he. Enough time had elapsed since his burnout. Now that his unemployment pay had been used up from the state, it was time to rejoin the work force.

He had tried several other avenues only to discover his age as a barrier. Also hampering him was the difficulty in explaining the long period of absence between his interview and his last job. Since his last job was a disaster, he could not put that on an application or resume, so he had to lie to his prospective employers, which meant he had to deliberately doctor up his resume and falsify his application. Each time he sent a resume off for a likely position, he was sending a fictionalized account of himself that might eventually catch up with him. At times, he would be called in for an interview and, when asked to fill out an application beforehand, began sweating. Each time he sat down to fill out such a document, he was forced to insert bogus dates and information on the form that the interviewer could challenge or, at a later date, after attempting to verify the information, find inconsistent with the truth. But the truth, not the fiction, he believed, would have been far worse. If he told them that he had a nervous breakdown and had been unable to do the type of work he had done before, a company would likely not have hired him, especially if the interviewer talked to his last employer. So, as he attempted, in frustration, to try his hand at technical writing again, an act of desperation, he had several uneventful interviews, undoubtedly due to what interviewers uncovered, but at least no one discovered what had caused the discrepancies nor found out what he had really been doing for an entire year: writing a novel.

Unfortunately, but to no surprise to him, he didn't get hired by any of the companies he applied to, and his novel didn't sell. His wife, who at this stage could care less about his creative surge, was alarmed that he couldn't land a job. Perhaps, she suggested, they thought he was too old. It was more likely, however, that they had checked his background out and found those inconsistencies he had tried to hide. It was apparent to her that he must give up trying to get a white-collar job and just settle for a job—any job. He felt frustrated and was wracked with guilt. He had never done blue-collar, menial, or low-paying work. After awhile of being rejected by every place he applied for, he gave up for awhile and tried working at home, trying his hand at online sales, but it proved to be a half-hearted effort. The temptation was strong to return to his writing or sit there at his desk staring wistfully out of the window, hoping fleetingly for a breakthrough of some kind. His online effort was therefore no more successful than his interviews. When his wife told him once again he was dragging his feet and dodging the obvious remedy to his employment woes, he decided it was time to try something different.... But what?

His wife's income from the bank was no longer enough. He had to make some headway. He interviewed for a few sales positions, cringing at the prospects of actually being hired, and was secretly gratified they turned him down. He applied for positions totally unrelated to his Educational and employment background in which he was unqualified for in management, public relations, and even a human resource position, knowing full well he wouldn't get the job. More timidly he approached the avenue of manual labor and even checked a few well-known security guard services to find out what they paid. Fortunately, or

unfortunately (as he told his wife), the security agencies had no vacancies. For that matter no one would hire an ex-technical writer with an MA in history who was ‘over the hill’ for those more interesting jobs. He called a place offering a trainee position for a counselor, only to find out that they wanted someone who could speak Spanish. At another time for an apprentice position in a museum, that carried a level of respectability, he was told flatly that he was too old. Then one bleak day, after trying to get a position with the school district, his interviewer grew suspicious of his motives for such a menial job and was told he was overqualified. If he had lied properly on the application and left out all that garbage about degrees and his experience in technical writing he would have been a full time crossing guard now. The pay was much higher than what he would get as a clerk in a department store or apprentice in a museum. He might also have been working as a restaurant host if he could have given them a better reason for applying for the job. He couldn’t convince the young man interviewing him that he really wanted the job, which was true. He had never been a good actor. The only reason that the host and crossing guard jobs were more desirable, in fact, was that they paid more than minimum wage, which was more than what a deliveryman or security guard made. When he said he wanted a career change for such a job, they would look at his middle-aged face, glance at his “over-qualified resume” and know that it was a lie.

He was tired of lying and just wanted to be himself, and yet he began camouflaging his background, deleting information on his Education and even lying about his age, just to get his foot in the door, but when companies looked at his employment history and saw the gaps and inconsistencies, these omissions made no difference in the end. He was, if he took the positions, only fit for minimum wage at fast food restaurants or telemarketing jobs. It seemed that, as he approached his sixties, he would have to compete with retired seniors and high school students, ...until one day, as he walked up to the assistant manager at MacDonald’s with a hastily filled out application the very same moment that his cell phone rang.

In a lackluster voice, he muttered, “Hello.”

”Is this Eugene Woodruff?” a gravelly voice asked.

”None other,” he replied with a tinge of sarcasm. “Who is this?”

”Waverly,” he croaked. “You were referred to us by Quick Start Temporary Agency.”

”Good grief,” Eugene muttered.

That moment, as he handed the assistant manager at MacDonald’s his application, she glared at it a moment, looked up at him in disbelief, and heaved a sigh.

”You’re a bit overdressed,” she said, eying his suit. “We normally hire high school and college students. You look like you should be working in a bank.”

”Mister Woodruff,” Waverly broke in.

”Yes, I’m here,” Eugene grumbled. “I apologize for that.” “You’re a very impertinent young lady,” Eugene snapped at the woman. “What kind of work is this?” he exhaled wearily into his phone, as he pivoted and walked away. “

”Security,” replied Waverly frothily.

”Oh, that’s just perfect!” Eugene muttered to himself.

”Sir, sir,” the manager called irritably, “are you applying for this position or not?”

”Not!” he called over his shoulder, the cell phone still on his ear. One of the jobs he had been avoiding now seemed to be staring him in the face.

”Can you come in for an interview?” Waverly inquired, unruffled by Eugene’s rudeness.

”...When?” Eugene asked after a pause, filled with dread.

”How about tomorrow night?” snorted Waverly snorted. “Six o’clock sharp.”

“Okay,” Eugene replied, as he unlocked his car. “Thanks Mister Waverly,” he said in a deadpan voice. “Where’s it at?”

Waverly gave him the directions, which he punched into his iphone, almost in rote. He didn’t remember even thanking the man or saying goodbye. In fact, he tried not thinking about his upcoming interview. The grim resignation that he might become a security guard filled him with gloom.

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When he told his wife about the scheduled interview, she smiled faintly, nodded, and gave him a blank look.

”Are you serious this time?” She raised an eyebrow. “The last time you applied for a security guard job you panicked. I think they picked up on that. You’ve gotta change your attitude Eugene. This time go with a positive attitude, like you did for that counselor job.”

”Well, a positive attitude didn’t help me *then*,” he grumbled petulantly. “It’s either my age or being overqualified. It’s always *something*. I find this very strange, Nancy. At those temp agencies, I put down manager and trainee jobs on my application, that’s all. I never mentioned security guard. I don’t even remember the name of the person at the agency I talked to—some lady with a lisp and overbite. She treated me like I was retarded. I’m not going back to that place.”

”Tsk-tsk,” she cooed, “maybe you should take the medicine the psychiatrist gave you. You’ve got that look. Stop clenching your fists.”

”Not a chance,” he made a face. “That stuff makes me dopey. The last time I took it, I ran a red light and almost hit a pedestrian.”

It was plain to his family that Eugene was showing signs of his manic-depressive disorder. The problem usually occurred if he failed to take his medicine and was exacerbated by the pressures of applying for undesirable jobs. This time, though, his wife was growing desperate. They were running out of money. His excuses for not finding work had likewise run their course. That evening as they sat down to dinner, his son Bruce, who still lived at home, also searching for his path in life, tried cheering him up.

”It’s an easy job dad,” he said shoveling in a mouthful of food. “My friend Ben guarded a parking lot once. He said it was easy money. They let him sit in his car, as long as he made his rounds every hour.”

”Lord,” Eugene groaned, “I hope I don’t have to do that? Did that make him wear a uniform?”

”Yeah,” Bruce snickered behind his hand, “a real sporty outfit. He carried a big flashlight—must’ve been a thousand amps. But most of the time, he stayed out of sight and hid his car.”

”How much did they pay him?” Eugene grumbled. “Most of those kind’ve jobs are minimum wage.”

”Twelve bucks an hour,” chirped Bruce, “more than I got at Wendy’s.”

”Why don’t *you* apply for the job?” Eugene frowned. “You’ve been out of work longer than *me*.”

”Where’s this interview at?” Helen interrupted. “Is it close to home?”

Eugene fished in his shirt pocket. “Here’s the address. It’s a high rise. I drove passed that place before—tallest building in the county. My interviews on the seventeenth floor.”

”Well, that’s a good sign,” she beamed. “High rise security is the up and coming thing.”

”Hah,” Eugene scoffed. “It’s probably where the security agency’s located. With my luck, I’ll wind up guarding a construction site. It’s just an interview, Helen. He might take one look at my application and give me the bum’s rush.”

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That night Eugene lie awake staring at the ceiling, wondering how things had gotten so bad that he was forced into security guard work. After his burnout at Thermal Dynamics, everything had gotten progressively worse. Those months on disability, in which he began writing his book, tried half-heartedly to find work, and was finally encouraged by the psychiatrist to get back to work, had brought him only heartache and mental stress. The medicine prescribed by the doctor had made him feel so dopey and uninspired during his efforts as an author he stopped taking it. With a modicum of success, he had been able to function without Prozac, but lately his depression had returned full force. Never a drinking man, he was nevertheless tempted to find that fifty-year old scotch his father gave to him several years ago.... Perhaps, he might even take a few pills again to bring down his mood.

When he awakened the next day, with a full day ahead of him until his new job started, he returned to work on his second novel. Now that he might have a job, his conscience was clear. He decided to give his publishing career another chance. His wife was at work, and his son was still asleep. His last novel, that received zero acceptances after hundreds of submissions, had received little or no attention. Of the few comments he received, “No one wants to read young adult science fiction anymore,” and “This is an overused theme,” didn’t bother him as much as the fact that over nine-five percent of the publishers didn’t respond at all. Most of the small number returning a reply, sent form letter emails, briefly stated, such as “Thank you for submitting your novel, but we’ve decided to pass.” On a mental backburner, he placed his first book. Today, however, was a new beginning for him. He would write something that would sell this time.... The question was, he asked himself as he stared at his laptop screen, ... what?

After an hour of struggling with a theme, Eugene began researching online for ideas. Judging by their book lists, most publishers were interested in romance, mystery, horror, and young adult fiction. Fictionalized feel-good stories about people overcoming illness and calamity was also popular. Since most publishers required authors to have agents and only a few publishers even read new submissions, these overriding factors of course trumped all other factors, but he must at least get on the right track. Though it rankled him to consider the possibility, he narrowed his selection of salable topics to horror or mystery, unless he could spin his personal trials and tribulations into a tale. The question again was “What?”

The next day found Eugene restless and out of sorts as he waited for the appointed time. Though his anxiety had been high, he arrived at the high rise with low expectations. It was good thing he allowed himself enough time. The workday traffic had been particularly congested, and there was road construction near the high rise. When he arrived in the lobby where he expected to meet the agent, Waverly was nowhere in sight. The day guard, who might be making his rounds, was also absent. For a moment, he almost did an about face. What kind of operation was this? He wondered. What stopped him cold, were his wife’s final words when he left this evening, “Don’t let me down, Eugene. Give this job a chance!

Then he spotted a sign over the door next to the lobby counter that read **Building Office**. When he entered the office, he found it empty too. The lights weren’t even on in this room, and because the blinds were drawn, left him in almost total darkness. Another red flag popped up in

his mind and he was tempted to leave, until, out of nowhere it seemed, the lights came on, and a strange looking man appeared. Startled by his sudden appearance, Eugene gasped and gripped his forehead.

“Damn,” he muttered.

“You, Eugene Woodruff?” he asked gruffly.

“Yes.” He nodded faintly.

The sound of toilet running in the next room told him where the man had been. When he shook Eugene’s hand it was still moist. One more red flag rose in his brain, as the man waited for an answer.

“I’m not going to lie to you,” Eugene answered. “I know nothing about security work. I need a job—end of subject.”

Cocking a bushy eyebrow, Waverly looked Eugene up and down, and, with a wave of his hand, replied, “Okay, fair enough.”

As he studied the man a moment, he wasn’t impressed. As usual, he wore a suit and tie and polished shoes, whereas Waverly wore a gray sweatshirt, contrasting black slacks, and tennis shoes. He looked like he had just been jogging. He was unshaven and looked as though he hadn’t had a haircut in many months. Was this supposed interview for real? He wondered. He wasn’t clear what Waverly meant by “Okay, fair enough,” and he was afraid to ask. Was he offering him a job of simply acknowledging the statement he just made?

With misgivings now, Eugene asked, “Do I need to fill out an application?”

Waverly shook his head impatiently, running a hand through his stringy hair. “I know everything I need to know, Mister Woodruff. The agency sent over a copy of your application.”

When Eugene glanced around the room, which had been filled with a building manager and office personnel during working hours, he was filled with disquiet. The casualness of the interview, if it could even be called that, and man’s demeanor and attire, caused yet another red flag to surface in his mind. Apparently, Waverly didn’t care about his background or the lame reason he gave him for wanting this job. What he did do, however, was question Eugene on his frame of mind.

“Are you superstitious, Mister Woodruff?” he inquired, folding his arms.

“I believe in God, but I’m not superstitious,” answered Eugene.

“Fair enough,” he pursed his lips. “The question is, “do you mind working the graveyard shift?””

“Yes, of course,” Eugene responded forthrightly, “but I’ll do it. I need the money.”

“Your honest, Mister Woodruff. I like that.” He set his jaw. “No one in their right mind likes working the graveyard shift. If he says he does, he’s lying.”

“One more question,” he said, scratching his chin. “You’ll be working with eccentric people? Will that be a problem for you?”

“Not at all,” Eugene replied in cavalier voice. “I’ve worked with some real *assholes*.”

“Well, that’s good enough for me.”

They were strange questions, thought Eugene, but Waverly, after all, was a *strange man*. When Eugene asked him about the pay, he was greatly surprised when he was told him the pay was twenty-five dollars an hour. Though apprehensive, his mood changed from being totally uninspired to immediately interested in the position. The next question from his disbelieving lips was, “are you making me an offer?”

Waverly nodded obliquely and shoved a sheet of paper toward him. It was a very brief contract, handwritten with almost perfect calligraphic form. It read simply: ‘You must arrive

promptly at the hour (not a moment before or after) and make an hourly check of each of the twenty-five floors, from 12 am to 8 am. At the end of your shift, you will leave at exactly 8 am. It was so simple, Eugene giggled foolishly as he signed his name. Bluntly now, he asked when he would be paid. Waverly told him just as bluntly that he would be paid each week, payment being made to the address shown on his previous application. Though he had received several mental red flags, which had worried him, Eugene's sloppy signature was on the contract. When Waverly told him that the contract was binding, he uttered a hysterical laugh. It was just too absurd to believe. Nevertheless, another red flag—this one a banner warning, was raised in his mind. The contract was binding.... What did that mean?

Waverly gave him a red sports jacket, matching tie, and dark blue slacks—the uniform worn in the Chevington Plaza Business Building. Wishing him good luck, he signaled that he was dismissed by motioning to the door. It was as simple as that. When he told his wife about his meeting, she was concerned at first. What tempered her concern, as they debated the issue, was the hourly rate Eugene would be paid. Both of them agreed that it was a high rate for such a simple job. Despite her blessing, he knew she was worried, too, and he slept fitfully that night.

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Several moments before midnight, after a long, restless day of working on his book and anticipating his new job, he arrived at Chevington Plaza in his red sports coat and tie. For that short period, he waited at the entrance for the swing shift guard to arrive. Finally, a shadowy figure emerged on the other side of the door. There was subdued lighting in the lobby. Through the glass, it was difficult to discern the image. The sound of keys rattling, followed by the lock clicking, was an eerie sound. When the door opened to allow entry, he slipped in, expecting a greeting, but found the lobby empty. With the specter disappearing so suddenly, it felt as if he had just entered an inner sanctum. Popping up like a jack-o-lantern from the lobby desk, clipboard in hand, the guard looked across the floor at him but said nothing.

"Oh, there you are!" Eugene said airily.

Motioning rudely at him and grumbling, "Your early!" the elderly woman waited impatiently behind the counter. As he approached, he remembered Waverly's question, "Do you have a problem with eccentric people?" She shoved a nametag across the counter. Fastening it to his lapel, he took time to read her tag: Madelyn Le Blanc. Inclining her head, as would a crone, she studied him a moment before shaking his hand. Though she mumbled, "Glad to meet you," the look in her hawk-like eyes wasn't friendly. Her handshake, reminded him uncooked fowl.

"Here's the log," she snorted. "Check all twenty-five floors each hour. Carry this clipboard with you. Check off each floor as you make your rounds."

On that note, as she made her exit, Eugene called out politely,

"Have a nice evening!" and Madelyn, moving swiftly for her age, called back sarcastically, "The evenings gone!"

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At midnight as he began checking doors, he heard strange night sounds on the seventeenth floor. They weren't anything spectacular at first, just a few high-pitched giggles and a muffled conversation, which he couldn't make out. They were coming out of suite seventeen b, which, according to his clipboard notes, was unoccupied and under renovation. At first, he

decided that there must after hour workers in this suite. As he continued his rounds, he called his wife to report in. She had waited up for him for his first night on the job. He told her about the cranky night guard and her exaggerated emphasis on his security duties in the building, and she was encouraged by his resignation and attempt at humor. When he told her about the noises in suite seventeen b, she agreed that it must be workers inside the suite. As he continued up the building, however, he encountered a janitor, who insisted that there were no workers here at this hour.

The old man, who identified himself as Ed Greebs, related a chilling tale that moment.

"It happened last year. Stuart Rosenfeldt massacred his entire staff. No one knows what motivated him to murder them and turn the gun on himself. After the murders, other tenants on seventeen claimed to hear noises in that suite—real spooky sounds, like talking, laughter, and such. Because of the gossip, it's been impossible to rent it out. The word is Chevington Plaza's been doing renovation, but it's taken too long for something like that. The rumor is sir, that, after the massacre, the previous occupants, now deceased, return to the scene of the crime. They gather at the stroke of midnight as they had that last day. Rosenfeldt, himself, can be heard trekking up the stairwell until reaching his firm. Occasionally, I hear a door slam on seventeen, but just as I reach that floor, the door to the suite will be shut. Sometimes, when I listened to the strange goings on there, it seems like they're having a party.... To tell the truth, sir, most of the time I avoid seventeen altogether. Take my advice, you avoid it too."

"Well, that's quite a story," snickered Eugene. "You ever meet Rosenfeldt on the stairs?"

"Of course not!" he shuddered. "I don't take the stairs. I take the elevator. I don't think *anyone's* met him!" "You stay away from that suite!" he warned, moving on. "Something horrible happened in that room!"

Because he had heard nothing about this from the swing shift guard, he decided that Ed must be addled. Despite this conclusion, the janitor's squinty eyes and leprechaun demeanor had given him the creeps. He couldn't imagine a more perfect person to deliver such as tale. Perhaps, Ed, for some quirky reason, just wanted to scare him. He couldn't very well avoid the seventeenth floor, as he suggested. That night as he made his rounds a second time, he decided to investigate and, hopefully, put to rest this tall tale. Finding the door locked, he sighed with relief, satisfied that his instincts were correct. Most of the other suites in the building were secured too, the exceptions being a few firms and offices that carelessly forgot to lock their doors. Locked doors made his job easier, he reasoned. It would be a hassle for him to check the interior of each suite. Because Eugene had started his shift on the hour old man Rosenfeldt supposedly visited his suite, he wouldn't have to test out the janitor's claim. Nevertheless, as 2 am drew near, he grew bored of his hourly rounds, and was drawn back to suite seventeen b. He had only checked the door once; that should have been sufficient. When he turned to knob this time and heard it open, he gasped loudly, recoiling from the door. His first thought was that an employee or worker had returned; for what reason he couldn't imagine. When he stepped into the room, he was immediately greeted by a beaming young woman sitting behind the receptionist desk at the entrance of the suite. Judging by her flushed face and silly grin, she appeared to be inebriated. A cacophony of laughter and loud outbursts typical of drunken revelry, which he hadn't heard in the hall, assailed his ears. He recalled Ed telling him about such noises. Beyond the receptionist's desk, he could see men and women in a party mode. In the center of the main room, stood the corpulent figure of a fellow, Eugene suspected was none other than Stuart Rosenfeldt, himself.

"Holy shit!" he cried, backing away toward the door. "Ed was telling the truth!"

"Yes-yes, Ed knows," giggled the receptionist. "He's afraid of us now. He knows the truth!"

"Truth, what truth?" Eugene asked, studying the scene. "... Is this some kind of stunt? Are you supposed to be ghosts?" "I'm going nuts," he muttered to himself. "That has to be it. I should've taken my meds!"

"Lighten up." She cocked an eyebrow. "Look around you sir. Do we look like ghosts?"

Scanning the suite, he could see men and women cavorting together with drinks in their hands. From a distance, in fact, they looked like typical merrymakers... with one important exception at first glance: Rosenfeldt. Unlike the others, who wore conservative business appropriate for a business office, Rosenfeldt was dressed garishly in a herringbone jacket, striped vest, and bow tie. Moreover, his features seemed exaggerated, almost clown like. Against his audience, he loomed large in the crowded room: a loud, uncouth specter of a man, grossly overweight. Even from afar, the details stood out. His nose was red and cheeks were splotchy. Though his head was starkly bald, whiskers stuck out shaggily on each side of his face. The most unsettling aspect of this man, Eugene noted, was his expression. Two dark coals for pupils, set in wide bloodshot eyes, stared unblinkingly at his employees. As he stepped forward a few paces, he got a closer look at the receptionist as well as others in the room, which seemed even more unsettling. Upon closer inspection, the woman's face was tastelessly painted and her blond hair glistened like the synthetic hair on mannequins. Her cold blue eyes had, the thought struck him cold, a dead fish look. The faces of her co-workers, he realized with horror, seemed like death masks. Unlike Rosenfeldt and his receptionist, who had clown-like expressions, their mouths moved jerkily, as would puppets and their gaze, similar to Rosenfeldt's eyes, were unblinking orbs, looking this way and that, as they swiveled their necks, an action reminiscent of zombies Eugene had seen in movies.

Suddenly, as they became aware of their visitor, the men and women turned simultaneously toward him, Rosenfeldt at the forefront. Looking askance at her, the looming presence of the receptionist completed the scenario of horror in his mind.

"Awe, we have a guest," Rosenfeldt bellowed.

"Welcome," the men and women drawled, "join the party!"

"He knows," exclaimed the receptionist. "Ed told him. He thinks we're ghosts!"

"This is insane!" cried Eugene.

Reeling around frantically, he charged the door, struggled with the doorknob a moment, then, after the great door opened, fled down the hall. He heard laughter as the door slammed shut behind him, but, as he climbed into the elevator, he looked out to an empty corridor. No one had followed him. To hell with Madelyn, the thought, as the elevator doors opened. He planned now to spend the remaining of his shift in the lobby. If anyone from the security agency came to check on him, he would be able to see them approach in a lobby camera and, after scurrying into the stairwell pretend he was just coming off his rounds. This had been his plan, but, as it turned out, no one came to check on him during his shift. In the building office, he made himself a pot of coffee, and then, with a brimming mug in his hand, sat down behind the lobby desk, half convinced he had gone mad.... The other half, which had never experienced a hallucination before, was not so sure. Everything he saw in suite seventeen b was bizarre but not dream-like. It looked and smelled real. The images remained steady and unchanging. The odor of perfume, alcohol, and food wafted in the air. From what he had read of hallucinations, they were more transient and surreal.... So, he reasoned, if this hadn't been a hallucination and he wasn't insane, had there been ghosts in suite seventeen b? What had happened in that room? If

not spirits of the dead, were they the walking dead—zombies returning to the scene of that unspeakable crime?

He felt as if he had escaped a horrible fate, and yet no one had pursued him. This made him wonder again if it had not all been a hallucination. He had learned about this room only from Ed, the janitor. Had he been a hallucination too...or was he just another ghost? The thought occurred to him, as he recalled Madelyn's cranky face, that she might also have been an apparition. And what if Waverly, the personnel agent who gave him the job, was another hallucination? Could all of this be one continuous figment of his imagination, the result of ignoring his medications and slipping finally over the Edge? At the very least, he reasoned, ghosts or not, Madelyn might have known about this phenomenon, but had kept this information to herself. Would he admit to seeing and hearing something like this? Who would believe such a story, unless they experienced it themselves?

As he sipped his coffee, he was tempted to flee the building entirely and put these questions behind him. After all, he reasoned, he could find another job. On the other hand, such an action would appear indefensible. How could explain this to anyone without them thinking he was insane? After his breakdown, months of therapy, and receiving Medicaid instead of the salary he and his wife had depended on to pay bills, how would it sound if he told her about tonight? She might threaten to divorce him. If he ran away from his post, he would have to go searching for another job. Considering the discrepancies on his patchy resume, he had been lucky to find this position. Who would hire him this time? He had but two alternatives, neither of them desirable: remain a security guard in this spooky building or quit this very night and try to find something else.

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When morning came, the day guard, a crotchety old man with a limp, arrived right before the employees streamed into the building. Eugene had spent a difficult eight-hour shift. After discovering the crowd in seventeen b, he had no desire to test his senses. He went on a few rounds, using the elevator, avoiding the seventeenth floor entirely, falsifying the graveyard log with entries showing hourly rounds for each floor he never made. His relief, who introduced himself simply as Buck, struck Eugene as slightly senile. For a few moments, as Buck settled into the lobby, pouring himself coffee, glancing at the log, and commenting on the rear end of a female employee, after she flashed him her badge, Eugene wondered if he should tell him about what he saw. Perhaps, he told himself, as Buck stood there muttering to himself, this was the perfect person to break the news to. He might have seen the folks in seventeen b, himself. After broaching the topic, however, he realized how ridiculous he sounded.

"Late at night," he began carefully, "I met a janitor on the seventeenth floor—a peculiar ol' fellow named Ed Greebs. He told me something very strange."

"Wait a minute sonny," Buck interrupted rudely, "there ain't no janitors on the graveyard shift—not that I know of."

"Well," Eugene frowned with irritation. "I met him. He might've been working overtime—I dunno, but he was there with his cart on the seventeenth floor, as I made my rounds."

"You sure, eh?" Buck replied, sipping his coffee. "That floors almost empty. Suite Seventeen b and c also vacated after that incident. Folks were really shaken up—all over the building."

"What incident?" Eugene, who already knew the answer, caught his breath. "What happened up there?"

Buck looked at him in disbelief. “Didn’t they tell you?”

“Tell me what?” Eugene feigned ignorance. “All I heard was that they were renovating seventeen b.”

“Well, I wasn’t here then. I work days... Story goes that Stuart Rosenfeldt, head of Rosenfeldt and Rossi, went berserk and killed several of his employees—lawyers, law clerks, and what, before blowing out his brains. What the survivors told was a real nightmare. It was in the news. Where you been for the last several years?”

“...I heard something like this awhile back,” Eugene searched his memory, “but I never associated it with this building. With all the terrorism and general mayhem in the media, I never made the connection.” “Holy shit!” he sighed. “Of all the places to work!”

“It ain’t so bad. You got it easy on your shift. Days can be hell. Roger and I have to put up with a lot of crap.” By the way,” he muttered querulously, “where *is* Roger? He’s always late.”

Buck’s story had been almost the same as Ed’s. Why hadn’t Buck ever heard of this man? Greatly irritated by the tardiness of his partner, the crotchety old man drifted off the subject. If he returned to the topic, Eugene decided not to tell him what he saw, only what Ed told him. For some reason, Buck’s corroboration of what the janitor knew and what he, himself, experienced shook him up. It reminded him of a horror movie he once saw. The more he thought about it, the more he hoped Buck stayed off the subject. There might be grisly details even Ed was unaware of. For several more moments, as he delayed his departure, Buck chatted with him, adding his own comments about Roger’s tardiness. Making up a fictitious job, he tried sounding annoyed.

“It’s happened to me too,” he said, glancing at his watch. “At my last job, I had to wait for the night guy to show up. Sometimes that clown was an hour late!”

“Well, I wouldn’t stand for that!” Buck stomped his foot. “This time I’m reporting that bastard. This is the day shift. One of us has to watch the lobby, while the other makes his rounds. He knows that. He doesn’t take this job seriously. He’s just a kid. They shouldn’t hire kids for this kind’ve position. I worked all my life as a tool and die specialist, following the rules. Kids don’t listen to you these days. All they think about is sex and drugs! They don’t have any respect!”

Buck was red the face as he clinched his fist and pounded the desk. Late arriving employees eyed him with amusement or alarm as he carried on. One young man, wearing the same blazer that Buck and he wore, was laughing as he walked into the lobby. A pretty brunette in a business suite had been chatting with him as they entered the door. Their conversation indicated how immature Roger was. The woman told him with annoyance that she didn’t date employees. His cocky reply, “I’m not an employee, I’m a security guard”, sounded inane to Eugene, but for Buck, it was the last straw.

“You little prick!” he stormed. “This is the last time you pull this on me!”

“Oh, dear me!” the woman recoiled.

“Chill, pops,” snarled Roger. “Traffics heavy this time of the morning. You gotta beef, report me. I don’t give a shit!”

Roger, though he had to be at least eighteen for this position, looked no more than sixteen years old. Drawing on some of his own inner rage, Eugene poked him in the chest with his forefinger, giving him his fiercest look.

“Show some respect,” he growled. “You’d better give a shit. If I was him, I’d kick your ass!”

Roger gave him a shocked look. Buck was taken back. Fortunately, no one else appeared to have heard this exchange, as Eugene exited the scene.

“You’re crazy.” Roger muttered.

“Oh, you don’t know how crazy I am,” he called back.

On that note, he saluted Buck and departed the building, more troubled than ever after his outburst. Why had he lost his temper? Would Roger report him to management? Buck had also looked frightened; perhaps he would make the call. In a strange, unsettling way, though, Eugene didn’t care. The worst that could happen to him, would be to lose his job, but, after thinking about it a moment, he didn’t think that would happen. The security agency must be fairly hard up to hire old men, kids, and applicants with questionable pasts. His resume had been so doctored up, they couldn’t have checked his job history...or they just didn’t care. On the way to his car, a sudden inspiration struck him that caused him to freeze in his tracks. Trotting back to the building, he slipped into the lobby in time to see Roger exit in the elevator and Buck return from the office, a donut in his hand.

“What the hell you want?” he snapped at Eugene. “You’re shifts over—go home!”

“Buck,” Eugene came straight to the point. “This year, how many guards have had the graveyard shift?”

“I dunno.” He scratched his bald head. “It’s quite a few, especially after the murders. I can’t believe all that stuff about spirits and ghosts, but I heard it’s pretty spooky up there at night.”

Eugene sighed deeply, thinking *If I’m nuts, I’m in good company!*

“You saw ’em didn’t you?” he asked cagily. “I didn’t hear there was a janitor on graveyard; that’s a new detail. You’d think this building is haunted!”

“Yes...Thanks for leveling with me,” Eugene said, shaking his hand. “I was in seventeen b. I saw them—Old Man Rosenfeldt and his employees. I talked to a janitor, who must be a spook, too.”

“Don’t tell *them* that!” Buck said, pointing at the log. “Keep this under your hat... And stay out of seventeen b. Better yet avoid that floor.”

Ed had told him the same thing. It was good advice. After leaving the building, climbing into his car finally and heading home, Eugene felt relieved. Because there had been other sightings, he decided to tell his wife. He would, he also decided, bring his camera next time, and get proof. All of a sudden, a new meaning was given to Eugene Woodruff’s life. He was a man, who saw ghosts... Unlike, the other security guards, however, he would make the case to the agency. He would prove to them that there were spooks in seventeen b.

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That morning, soon after greeting his wife and before she left for work, he told her about his discovery in suite seventeen b. Her immediate reaction was expected. Even when he told her about the other security guards that had quit his post before him, who must have made the same discovery as him, she waved her hands irritably, scoffing at the notion of ghosts.

“You should never have gone off your meds.” She shook her head with dismay. “You convinced Doctor Rajeed you didn’t need them, but he was wrong. You’re hallucinating now.”

“Come one Nancy,” implored Eugene. “Several people saw it, not just me. How do you explain that?”

“I don’t know, Eugene,” she called over her shoulder after snatching up the keys, “but you can’t lose another job. Don’t repeat this to anyone else—you hear me? I’ve been patient. I need help with the bills!”

While watching his wife depart, Eugene’s spirits crashed down to earth. What kept him from falling back into depression was the information Buck imparted to him. The knowledge that this time she was wrong, in fact, buoyed his spirits. He would prove her wrong too. He would show the agency and employees of the building that there were ghosts in seventeen b. But he would do it later, he thought, looking ahead to a quick breakfast and long nap. This would require planning. Until he had proof, he would take Buck’s advice and keep this under his hat.

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That very day, after several hours sleep, Eugene spent his time researching his laptop for information on the incident in the building. The crux of what he found: Rosenfeldt went berserk and killed many of his employees, seriously injuring the remainder of them with a spray of bullets. His motive remains a mystery, though it was hinted that he was embittered over efforts by his partners to vote him off the board. The survivors of this massacre have kept a low profile ever since. Until recently, Chevington Plaza suffered greatly. According to building management, the suite in which the firm resided was still vacant, and, considering the lapse of time, the so-called renovation hadn’t fooled an investigative reporter, who called suite seventeen b the ‘Chamber of Death.’ During his Internet search, Nancy called from work to check up on him. When he told her what he was doing, she scoffed at him. Because she didn’t believe him in the first place, she thought it was a waste of time. “She still doesn’t trust me,” he grumbled, returning to his screen. “She’d probably thinks I’m looking up porn!” Eugene found the original news story about the massacre and follow-up stories but he could find very little on the survivors. There was, because of privacy laws, no information whatsoever on their addresses or phone numbers. That evening when his wife returned, Eugene had cleaned the house and done a little gardening—all to get on her good side. He said nothing about the ghosts or his research that day. If necessary, he might use the lobby computer if necessary. Carting his laptop along with him would be a red flag to his wife. With his digital camera in his coat pocket, he was prepared to photograph ghosts.

Small as it might seem, he now had a mission in life. When he pulled into the parking lot, the sparsely lighted outline of the building loomed darkly against the starlit sky. As he approached the shadowy lobby, Madelyn, the swing shift guard, was nowhere in sight. After meeting the senile Buck and Roger, his adolescent relief, he wondered what was in store for him. After calling her on his cell phone, receiving her answering machine, and leaving a curt message, he swore aloud, paced back and forth, until the ill-tempered woman unlocked the door.

“You’re early,” she snapped. “You’re supposed to arrive ten minutes before the hour, not twenty.”

Eugene looked at her in disbelief. “Are you serious?”

“Yes, of course,” she said testily. “I warned you about this, Woodruff. I like things prim and proper. You interrupted my rounds. I hadn’t finished my last floor!”

He grew indignant this time. “Prim and proper? What a crock! I’m here Madelyn. Get over it! What’s the matter with you? You should be thankful to get relieved early!”

“Well, *I’m not!*” she snorted, storming ahead of him. “Next time, show up on time and not so damn early!”

Eugene actually had two senior citizens to deal with, Buck and Madelyn, both of them suffering from dementia, Madelyn apparently the worst of the two. Without the required briefing she was supposed to give him before departing, she grabbed her purse, gave him a curt nod, and ambled away from the desk.

“Wait a minute,” he shouted through cupped hands. “I have a few questions for you Madelyn. Did you see anything strange on the seventeenth floor? Did you meet a janitor named Ed during your rounds?”

“Check the log,” she called over her shoulder. “There ain’t no janitor named Ed, and there’s no spooks in seventeen b. Buck warned me about you. The last fellow who made that claim got fired. Damn fool posted his photos on YouTube. This building has a bad enough reputation without being haunted.”

A thrill ran through Eugene. As he charged after her, he reached out excitedly to grab her elbow. “Wait, please wait. You say he took photos. I never saw them on YouTube. Are you certain? Do we have his phone number on file?”

“Get your hands off me!” she spat, jerking away. “I never saw the video. I don’t own a computer. His phone number should be in the log. Take my advice, forget about seventeen b. You best keep your suspicions to yourself!”

“Suspicious?” he mumbled as she crossed the parking lot. “You heard about it, didn’t you?” he called after her. “You heard the ghosts in seventeen b.”

“I didn’t hear nuthin,” she hollered back. “That room’s empty. Has been for quite awhile. Forget it, man. It’s not worth losing your job!”

Returning quickly to the desk, Eugene brought up the Internet on the lobby computer and typed in massacre on the seventeenth floor. As before, all he got was the information about the murders. When he typed in ghosts in seventeenth b, however, several entries immediately popped up. Most of the articles were from various media outlets, including the local station and papers, but only two YouTube entries popped up. First appeared the crime scene, itself, showing an empty room. In the background, a voice droned on about the ongoing case, which was information he had already read. The second YouTube video presented by the onetime security guard was a blurred scene of ghostly image against the same office setting. Typical of spectral imagery he had seen, the images were indistinct, white willowy, disembodied, faceless, incorporeal static, without personality or human form. Eugene’s heart sank in his chest as he pondered the video. Is this what Madelyn meant when she mentioned a YouTube photo?

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That night, as Eugene made his rounds, he skipped past the first sixteen floors, went straight to suite seventeen b with his camera ready, and found the door once more locked. On the eighteenth floor, he ran into Ed Greebs, the janitor, who supposedly doesn’t exist, but Ed was reluctant to unlock the door.

“Uh uh.” He rotated his head. “You don’t need to go in there. Orders are orders. That room stays locked, sonny, until they clean it up.”

Ed’s response was, of course, inconsistent with the facts. When Eugene asked him who ordered him, he made a gesture hard for him to define: he rolled his eyes upward, a gesture he had seen his wife do when she was disgusted with something he did. Was he implying irritation or, by the direction, was he pointing to heaven?

“What does that mean?” Eugene pointed upwards.

“Purgatory,” he replied cryptically. “... Are you a Catholic, Eugene? Look it up.”

“Shouldn’t you be looking down?” Eugene frowned. “I’m not a Catholic, sir, but I felt unvarnished evil in that room. Who are those people in seventeen supposed to be—demons?”

“There isn’t one purgatory, Eugene,” he answered directly. “... There are millions. Most folks can’t see them. You certainly can’t take pictures of them.”

“What?” Eugene’s eyes popped wide. “You’re telling me suite seventeen b is part of hell?”

“Not hell—purgatory.” He frowned irritably. “That room will exist for Rosenfeldt for a very long time, as he contemplates his crime—long after it’s demolished to make way for a new building, freeway, or mall. It’s where the crime was committed—the murders by Stuart Rosenfeldt, who played both judge and jury. Unlike Rosenfeldt, who must pay his debt, those people you saw, like all ghosts, haven’t crossed over. One day all of them will find the light. Until then they’re trapped in time and space.” “... You have a gift, sir,” he added dreamily. “You can see spirits of the dead...”

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Eugene Woodruff had never believed in spirits of the dead. Where all “bad” ghosts caught up in their own purgatories? This wasn’t explained to him by Ed, whom Eugene intuitively made the connection, fancied himself as the gatekeeper. Purgatory was a Catholic concept. He wasn’t even Catholic. He had heard about ghosts from childhood on, but he had never believed in them. Had Ed been talking only about specific places, such as rooms or dark corners? Where there private purgatories, as he said, everywhere? This sounded quite insane. Looking ahead, as he finished his shift, he wondered if he would see more ghosts. Ed told him he had a gift, but had previous guards seen the ghosts too? In spite of what Ed said, Eugene wasn’t sure he wanted to see more ‘spooks.’ Most folks didn’t believe in them. They evidently didn’t register on video.... With his psychological profile, it made him look even crazier... And yet, despite his failure to gather proof, he no longer doubted his sanity. He had no intention of visiting that room again, but he had seen ghosts in suite seventeen b. He had met a gate keeper to purgatory and been reaffirmed in what he had seen—secret knowledge he would tell no one else but carry the rest of his life.

## The Gypsy's Curse

The sound of the Rosary Hour was his earliest childhood reflection. He could remember, after sixty years, the monotonous chant: "Hail Mary full of grace blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus Christ." It had meant nothing to him back then, especially since his parents were not Roman Catholics and had never gone to church. But it still carried a haunting refrain for him as he tried to recall those early years. It somehow symbolized the countless hours he was left alone in his family's apartment and the neglect and punishment he suffered during this period in his life.

A psychiatrist had told him once that memory requires language. Without words to describe reference points, the meanings of such points become lost to the infant or toddler, unless they are associated with trauma or repetitious events. Although he was several months away from his second birthday during the winter of 1943, it was not so strange therefore that he recalled the repetitious Rosary Hour and a few traumatic sounds, such as his mother and father's voices and the memory of being beaten randomly whenever they were around. Apart from his parents and the basic rhythm of life, however, there were mostly unrecognizable noises and visual sights during this time. Trapped for most of his early childhood in the confines of his family's tiny apartment, his only reference points in the caboose-shaped domicile were the legs of furniture, the sides of walls, and the ere glow from lights and windows overhead. The redundancy he suffered during his imprisonment had practically branded the points in his mind. The hated noise box was located on top of a cabinet, as was the fan, which made a frightening humming sound when it was on. To a small, wobbly-legged child, such an elevation made the radio inaccessible even if he could turn it off or turn the volume down. He had no names then for any of the inanimate objects he saw repeatedly throughout each day; they were merely the boundaries of his small world. Such repetition, even the Rosary Hour, only reminded him that he was alone. But his early grasp of certain word meanings from his parents and rudimentary knowledge of symbols encountered when they gave him physical pain allowed him to recognize danger when it was near. Among these traumatic events stored forever in his mind, his recollections of various periods of terror and pain had given him a toddler's primitive language and list of symbols. The first symbols he was to retain were the thundering voice and shaking fist from both parents, which he had learned to mean, "Shut up or I'll beat you!" He learned with quivering lip and tearful eyes to be immediately obedient especially around his mother, since she was around the most. He also learned from his mother the words and symbols "Eat it or I'll cram it down your throat" after only a few tries. His father, whom he feared the most, since he was always louder and more agitated than his mother, had merely to look at him to make him behave. His only physical contact with his father, in fact, was an occasional smack on the rear or head, the sensation of his hair being yanked, or ears tweaked.

He would learn years later from his mother that his father had a deep resentment against him for the way he came into the world. Not only had his untimely birth almost killed his mother, but it was possible, because of this close call, that she might not be able to bear another child. He had been born breach and required a Caesarian operation, which in 1943 was much more dangerous than it was today. From the beginning therefore, in very real sense, he had started off on the wrong foot. After he was born, he would also learn later, his brother had dropped him from the porch. This was the "official" reason for the accident. His father was convinced for many years that he was brain damaged because of this accident. Because of this

mishap, the evil omens of his birth, and his sickly nature, his father treated him as if he was damaged goods, keeping him hidden from his neighbors and friends when they were visiting and, during the same visits, overcompensating for his deficiency by showing off his first-born son, who would remain for the rest of the father's eyes, the proverbial "apple of his eyes". From the very beginning of his life, Aaron had cast his shadow on his younger brother's parade. He would always be the smartest, the most athletic, and the best looking of the two boys. He was also the least bruised and battered of the two.

Although his mother felt as if Noel was a treasure in the first year of his life, Noel had been a sickly baby and had caused her great woe. He was born with asthma and had cried incessantly as an infant. He seemed to develop more slowly than his older brother Aaron. While Aaron was walking and talking like a two-year-old by the age of eighteen months, Noel was still crawling in the winter of 1943, even though he could walk if he wanted to, and would talk to himself when no one was around. Cruel words from his father about his apparent retardation and inability to be potty trained would never be recalled by Noel, but the physical reactions caused by his father's attitude toward him was felt repeatedly during this time. There was a certain look that his father would show throughout his childhood but was especially frightening back then. His father would grind his teeth and move his jaw horizontally as moved his jaws. His severe gray eyes would become mere slits, his nostrils would flare, and his fists would be trembling at his sides as if he just wanted to beat Aaron to death.

By the winter of 1943, therefore, Noel had learned when his father was lurking in their home. From a distance, he would hear a door slam, grumbling under the breath (that sounded as if it came from a wild animal), and loud cursing, many times at his mother, which often had Noel's name in part of the curse. There were also movements and changes in his mother's voice that alerted him to changes in her mood. It had been several months since his first year had begun and he was obviously no longer the little treasure in his mother's eyes. They didn't seem to want him now and perhaps, as far as his father was concerned, never had. That his father hated him was a message he had been receiving since birth, but from his mother he had received mixed signals for the past several months. She might strike him or shake him to make him shut up or behave then turn around and kiss him and stick a pacifier or piece of candy in his mouth. Ironically, this made him trust her even less than his father. At least with him, he knew what to expect.

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Today, as Noel crawled abstractedly over the cold wooden floor, the sound of "Hail Mary full of grace..." was becoming unbearable for him. During the mornings before his mother left the apartment with his older brother to go shopping in town, she would listen to a musical program, featuring the big bands. She seldom ever bothered to turn the radio off unless she did not leave the house. He would never know why she had taken his older brother and not him shopping, but he would always feel abandoned by their exit and always wait for at least an hour after they left. This particular morning, as he listened to the dreadful chant, he let out a howl that would have set his father's teeth on Edge and caused his mother to cringe.

His neighbors had heard his crying all hours of the night and managed to ignore the telltale signs of abuse that they saw throughout the week. But this time, for the housewives at home with their children, and the sleeping husbands, who worked the night shift at the airplane factory or rail road, it was too much. Several hours passed as the hungry and forlorn child lapsed into torpor and then erupted into a new round of screams. Something dreadful must be wrong to

cause poor little Noel to carry on this way. Perhaps his family's apartment has just caught fire or he had gotten himself injured in some way.

Noel Bridger now began to wheeze. His recurrent asthma was brought on by the allergies in his home, including his mother's cigarette smoke and his Dad's pipe, and the sort of stress he was suffering during his mother's absence. No one, even his well-intended neighbors, could know how much danger her was in this time.

In the apartment across the courtyard Alphonse Marello complained to his wife "Rosie, how'my gonna keep awake-a tonight. He's at it again, that Bridger boy. Someone's gotta go stop-a him, make'em shaddup hees mouth."

"Poor bambino," Rosie, who was cleaning her kitchen, paused to say, "what's the mattah with that Bridger woman. She takes her older kid shopping but leave her baby boy at home."

"Rosie, you let the police handle this," Alphonse advised, turning in the bed and placing his pillow over his ear. "But call them anonymously. Don't give your name. Tell them what we hear night and day."

"Alphonse," she shook her head, "they might take that baby from his mother if the know what goes on. Someone, maybe a bunch of us neighbors, could get together and go, as a group to their house. If the Bridgers saw the entire neighborhood was against them, maybe they would change."

"Ha! Let the police do their job!" Alphonse said, rising up in his pajamas and pulling on his robe. "That woman might just punch you in the nose!"

"Not if I had plenty of people with me." Rosie replied, shaking her head and reaching for the phone. "She would not dare hit Madya's grandma. That old Gypsy's gaze is enough to make our kids behave. And Terri Johnson—she's a big, powerful woman that no one in this neighborhood's gonna trifle with. I don't think Misses Bridger would mess with her!"

Alphonse raised his palms upward and looked up the ceiling as if to say, "Lord, what am I going to with this woman?"

"I will begin calling now." Rosie nodded bravely.

"Hey, you make-a sure that Bridger woman she don't find out, hokay?" he whispered as she dialed the phone.

If she knew that little Noel was having an asthma attack, she would have been even more alarmed and probably called an ambulance. Alphonse, who also worked at the railroad but on the second shift, would try to sleep a few more hours but he too was troubled by what was going on in the Bridger household. His seven children, who, except little Gina, were all in school, knew who was boss in the Marinello household, but, in such matters, he knew Rosie knew best.

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"Hello, is this Maureen Sutters?" she began in earnest. Alphonse had given up sleeping and was sitting next to her in their tiny living room.

"Who is this?" Maureen asked groggily.

"Remember, there is safety in numbers," her husband whispered into her ear.

"This is your neighbor Rosie," miss Marinello's voice quivered. "Hey, how ya been doin', Maureen?"

"Oh, Rosie, I'm sorry I sounded so cranky," Maureen replied contritely. "My sinuses are killing me this morning. It's that damn project furnace. Somebody's burnin' rubber or something in it. I was thinking about calling on Madya for a cure, but Harry wants me to see the company doctor. I heard Madya has some of those belladonnas now."

"Hey Maureen, all right already. Sure-sure, Madya's better than one of them quacks, but listen," she changed the subject entirely, "we gotta serious problem with that poor Bridger boy. We need to get together and talk to Louise and that husband of hers. You can't hear him like us, but he's wailing something awful now."

"Yeah, I know Rosie, poor little fellah," Maureen sighed heavily into the phone, "but Harry said I should mind my own business. He works with Bob, the boy's dad. You can see how touchy that might be, him being Bob's workmate and all."

"Listen Maureen," said Rosie, "this doesn't concern Harry. Those sons-of-bitches aren't home. Are they, huh? This is a housewives' call—you me and the other women here in the projects. Hey, those men don't know what goes on. (Alphonso bristled at this characterization.) I doubt if Bob Bridger knows his son's crying his heart out every morning, and maybe he don't care, but I do. I'm worried that kid might be hurt or something. What if he's sick and they're ignoring it, huh?"

"I don't know..." Maureen began to seriously procrastinate. "I heard that Bridger woman has a mean temper. I heard from Madya that she's got the evil eye, and, being a Gypsy, Madya should know."

"Mother Mary!" Rosie exhaled deeply into the phone. "You're twice as big as that bitch, Maureen. You're a Christian woman, ain't you? You think our blessed Mary would allow that?"

"Madya says—" Maureen began.

"Madya Schmadya," Rosie sneered, "don't quote that crazy old woman to me. I'm coming over to get you, so be ready Maureen. We're gonna have us a talk with that Louise."

"But Rosie," Maureen started to argue.

By then, however, Rosie had already begun throwing on a shift and pair of slippers and was soon shuffling to her best friend's house.

The Sutter's project sat across the courtyard from the Marinello's. A sea of sheets and various items of clothing, freshly washed in the washroom, hung on the lines from the wooden posts cemented into the blacktop. Already many of the tenants had done their Monday laundry, and Rosie's family's clothing and sheets would be hanging on the same lines Friday when she did her laundry for the week. A playground sat beside the laundry lines and on the far side, near the washroom, stood the dreaded furnace used by residents for burning all manner of trash. Although there was crab grass growing on the ground surrounding the courtyard, there were only a few bushes and trees planted by the government, all of which were situated around the play and park area, where families could use the communal barbeque pit while the kids played on the swings and slide. Rosie Marinello had migrated with her husband and children to Los Angeles from New York's Hells Kitchen. Other tenants complained constantly about the bad plumbing, cramped spaces and tiny iceboxes for cooling their perishables, but for the Marinello's, who had big plans in Southern California, the projects were practically paradise. Even the rising problem with the Zoot suiters and Pachucos in the surrounding town could not compare in their minds with the crime rate in Hell's Kitchen. In the months ahead, this opinion by the Marinellos would change during the Zoot suiter wars, but for now Rosie's concerns were for her neighbors—a community that had replaced the Italian families she had known in New York.

She was as always concerned about her neighbors, this time for a tiny toddler named Noel Bridger. This latest crusade found her at Maureen Sutter's door, but already the mystic Madya Shimanka knew what was about.

Peering out her heavy satin curtain, she spied the Italian matriarch moving as a storm through the bellowing sheets. A faint smile broke her chiseled features. Clearly in her dark eyes the mysteries of her ancient people dwelled. When Maureen finally answered her door, her worried expression did not deter her friend.

"Come on Maureen." She reached and yanked her wrist. "By the time that Bridger woman is back we'll be standing united by her door. We gotta let her know where we all stand!"

Protesting all the way, Maureen was led toward Lois Blevens' domicile. Unlike, the more timid Maureen, Lois, who was just now bringing in her laundry, agreed immediately.

"Sure, hon," she chirped, "lemme put this away. I'll be with you in a jiff."

"Meet us at Terri's place," Rosie waved, charging through two of the caboose-shaped projects with Maureen straggling far behind.

"Terri won't go for this," Maureen called faintly. "Her husband's one of those conscientious objectors."

"Yeah, like you huh, Maureen," Rosie called back over her shoulder. "Please, I know you're afraid of that Louise, but Terri ain't. She's the biggest broad in the projects."

Terri Johnson heard Maureen arguing with Rosie about how the big blond was friends with Louise Bridger and would not believe that Louise was endangering her son. Upon reflection, however, Terri realized that Louise had been acting standoffish lately and she didn't ever remember seeing her youngest son.

"All right what is this?" She opened the door suddenly and startled the two women half to death.

"Oh hello, Terri," Rosie said with a gasp. "You look upset Terri. They found your husband yet?"

"No, Rosie," she sighed, "I suspect he's at his parents. I think his Dad's trying to talk him into reporting before the deadline."

"I thought they were going to arrest him," Rosie looked quizzically into the dark room in back of Terri, an inner sanctum that no one had ever seen.

"He's got one more week," Terri shrugged. "I gotta get a job at the cannery or Goodyear tires. Maybe I'll become a riveter at the airplane factory or join the nursing corps."

"What about his job at the Railroad?" Maureen asked, pretending concern.

"He managed to get himself fired, and those sons-a-bitches reported him to the draft board." Terri explained, searching Maureen's expression.

She knew Maureen despised the philandering Clu Johnson for constantly making passes at the other woman (other than Maureen) at the projects, including Rosie, herself. The fact that the handsome Clu was being drafted, she knew, filled the homely Maureen with mixed emotions. For her own part, she had a Dear John letter already planned out in her head and plans of her own.

"It's about the Bridger boy," Terri said, amused by their mute expressions. "Ruth Schoenberg called me about the crying. I told her it's none of our business, but I'm not so sure now. To tell you the truth, Rosie and Maureen, I think that Bridger boy might be Clu's son. That's why Louise is always hiding him in there."

"Nah, I don't think so." Maureen shook her head vigorously. "Louise is a lot of things, but a slut ain't one of them. I know my husband sure eyes her a lot, but I never seen her flirt with anyone here."

"You're in denial, Maureen." Terri smirked at her.

"Come on, let's go." Rosie nudged Maureen. "You comin, Terri." She frowned at the overbearing blond.

"I'll go, if Ruth goes," Terri snickered, giving Rosie's dark curls a pat. "Hey, you folks don't like that Jew lady, do ya?" she asked them both.

"That ain't true," Rosie protested indignantly. "Ruth is just unfriendly. That woman stays locked up in their twenty-four hours a day."

"Well, did you know that her parents were murdered in their shop by Nazi thugs?" Terri snarled, her big blue eyes blood shot from weeks of dipping into Clu's supply of gin.

Rosie, Lois, and Maureen had forgotten how tall Terri was. She had begun to intimidate them both, her attitude bespeaking alcoholic abuse more than unfriendliness. Everyone knew about the rumors coming from Europe, but it was enough to concern themselves about day-to-day affairs at the projects.

"Listen, Terri, if you can talk that lady into going with us, she's more than welcome," Rosie was growing impatient. "Please, this is a serious matter Terri. We got to stick together and do what's right around here."

Without another word, Terri lurched out her door and forged ahead of them as they searched for Ruth's domicile. Ruth lived in back of the Bridgers and could hear everything that went on their house. Ira, her shy husband, whose 4-F classification allowed him the freedom to work at any job he wished, was currently selling appliances in town. He, like mister Blevens and mister Marinello, wanted no truck with the Bridgers, but to the three women's surprise, his wife Ruth immediately, though quietly, obliged them when they came calling.

"There is safety in numbers, eh Ruth." Maureen elbowed the bony little woman playfully. "*We're* the Nazis here!"

"You wouldn't know a Nazi from a Zoot suiter," Terri snickered, now walking ahead of the smaller woman as if she was the leader now.

"Aren't we gonna invite Madya along?" Lois whispered to Rosie.

"We don't have to," Rosie said knowingly, as they stood finally in front of the Bridger project.

Suddenly, inexplicably, Madya Shimenak was standing in their midst, her colorful, flouncey Gypsy dress belying an hourglass shape. Reminiscent of a hawk or eagle, two dark eyes peered out quizzically from her head. An amused smile played on her lips, as she studied her neighbors.

"My dearest, you call upon Madya and voir, here she be!" she cried, jangling her bracelets as she raised her arms as if to bless them. "You are concerned about the Bridger boy. He is quite ill you know!"

"What are you talking about woman?" Rosie's eyebrows shot up. "What's wrong with the kid?"

"Do you not notice how quiet it is now inside their home?" she asked, prancing onto the Bridger porch and rattling the door handle.

"How could you know that, Madya?" Lois frowned. "No one ever sees the kid. He could have two heads for all we know."

"We must break in and save him," Madya grew frantic.

"Madya, are you acting again?" Rosie was growing suspicious.

"No," Madya shook her head and pressed her ear to the door, "I am growing psychic. I cannot explain these things. We must get in there *now!*"

"Nothing doing," Ruth found her voice.

"Are you serious, Madya," laughed Terri, "we could get arrested doing *that!*"

"Not if my Roxy does it *for* us," Madya offered matter-of-factly.

As suddenly as Madya's appearance, as if on cue, little Roxy appeared out of nowhere. Her red, white, and blue Gypsy dress and blouse was filthy for wear, and her dark round face was covered with grime.

"Why isn't that child in school?" Rosie asked with concern.

"Roxy is only four years old," she explained. "She seems much older than she is."

"Her clothes are filthy, and she needs a bath" Ruth said in a small voice.

"Enough of this idle chat." Madya waved dismissively. "Roxy will find a way in."

"Wait a minute." Maureen held out her hands. "I don't want any part in this!"

Roxy followed the foundation of the building, which overlapped the bottom of the building, on her toes while gripping the windowsill, which on the rude government housing amounted to a splintery two-by-four. It almost seemed as if she had done this before. When she was at the window, she merely scooted the unlatched window open and crawled simian-like into the room.

"Dear God!" cried Maureen.

"I been drinking," Terri confessed with a giggle. "This might be hard to explain."

At that point, the five other women began retreating, leaving Madya standing alone on the porch. Then, after hearing Roxy call out "Mama! Mama!" the door opened awkwardly and Roxy came struggling out with little Noel in her tiny arms. Madya quickly scooped the wheezing boy up and immediately laid him on the ground.

"He's turning blue!" Rosie wrung her hands.

"He's having an asthma attack," declared Madya calmly. "I've seen that before. Listen to his chest. Poor little Noel." "Here little one," she drew out a tiny blue vial; this will make you feel better. "

"What is that?" asked Maureen. "Is that dope?"

"It's all right," Madya said, opening the tiny bottle and waving it in front of the boy's nose. "Grandma has asthma too. Let him breathe it in a while, and it will lessen the paroxysms."

"All right Madya." Terri wrinkled her nose, dropping down on her haunches to sniff the bottle. "What's in the bottle? Smells like cleaning fluid to me. You sure you know what you're doing?"

Madya withdrew the bottle and reached into a pocket in her skirt and brought out a small rag. After pouring the fluid on the rag, she held it up to the boy's face. Soon the wheezing stopped. Noel Bridger looked up at the five women, frightened of these strange she-creatures who resembled his mother. It was the first time he had seen human beings other than his parents. He really could not consider his mischievous older brother human, but the smallness of Roxy appealed to him now. He held out his little hands to her and flexed his fingers as toddlers often do.

"There-there little one," Madya consoled him, as she cradled him in her arms. "Here, Roxy," she directed gently, "he wants you. I think you've made a new friend."

"Hi Noel," murmured Roxy, gently squeezing his little hand.

Noel looked up into Roxy's dark eyes unwaveringly for several moments as the five women discussed this event. Of all the faces on earth hers would haunt him the most throughout his long, often troubled life, but this hour, with his primitive and undeveloped perceptions of life, he was not quite sure what she was. She was not a she-creature like his mother or a he-creature, like his father. Nor was she a beastie-boy like his older brother, who hated him for being born.

Who was this warm, purring creature? He wondered. Roxy was special. Roxy had fallen immediately in love with her little neighbor, her desire to have a baby brother now seemingly fulfilled by her brave act. Noel sensed in his toddler's mind that he had found protectors, foremost of which was the little girl cuddling him now.

Then suddenly, from nowhere, a familiar voice rang out that made Noel's heart-shaped face contort in fear.

"It's her," Madya looked up into Rosie, Maureen, Lois, Terri, and Ruth's frightened faces. "Don't be afraid. Let me do the talking."

"How we gonna explain this?" Lois murmured to Maureen.

"What are you doing?" screeched Louise as she dragged her four-year-old son Aaron along by his arm.

Aaron, who was simpering now, had candy apple smeared all over his face. He looked pampered yet exhausted from a morning's shopping. Louise was holding several packages with her free hand. As she exited her automobile, she had looked haggard from her ordeal with Aaron, but now her face was animated with rage. The secret was out, Terri was certain. Her little bastard had become public. In Rosie and Madya's minds, however, no such suspicion came, but it seemed unconscionable that this beautiful child had been hidden for so long in his home.

Maureen, Lois, and Ruth were merely terrified by this dreadful woman. What would she do when she found out her house had been broken into to retrieve the child? Would she call the police or just attack them with maniacal rage?

"Why is my son in the arms of that little wretch?" Louise's pretty face became an ugly mask. "You damn Gypsies got some nerve? What are you doing here Terri? And you in cahoots with them brauds?"

"Your son nearly died from an asthma attack." Madya stepped forward, as Roxy continued to hug Noel. "We heard his screaming. When the screaming stopped, I called out but no one was home, but the door was unlocked, so I went in and brought him out. He's all right now, but you shouldn't leave an asthmatic child alone like this."

"It's none of your damn business," Louise said acidly. "My son doesn't have asthma. He was just throwing a tantrum. I can't take both of my sons everywhere I go."

"You never take Noel," Roxy said boldly.

"Get your filthy hands off my son," Louise snarled. "That's none of your business!"

"We made it our business," Rosie said, folding her arms. "If Madya hadn't given Noel that medicine, he'd a died. And all you can do is act like the stuffy bitch you are and frighten that sweet child!"

Maureen and Lois felt great pride and respect for their friend and gave her a spontaneous hug. Even the timid Ruth was bristling with anger at Louise's attitude at such a time.

"Rosie's right," Terri came forward menacingly, "you really *are* a bitch! You talk to me like that and I'll knock you on your ass!"

Aaron ran into the house, probably to use the restroom, totally unaffected by this conversation. He had probably seen his mother this way before. Louise reached down, without another word, rudely raised Noel up into her arms, and stormed into her house.

"You hurt that kid and I'll kick your ass!" Terri shouted after her.

"Now, now, that's the liquor talking Terri," Rosie patted her back. "That woman will have you arrested if you touch her. I got a better idea."

“We’ll all watch out for little Noel,” Ruth piped up. “Ira and I live the closest to the Bridgers. I can hear almost everything that goes on in there if I open my living room window and listen in.”

“My thoughts exactly!” Rosie smiled at Ruth.

“Hey, you really came out of the closet!” exclaimed Lois.

“Well, that woman reminds me of a Nazi!” Ruth frowned. “It’s time to take a stand!”

“In safety there is numbers.” Maureen nodded vigorously.

“Right,” said Rosie, “and my place is directly across the courtyard. If the lines aren’t filled, I can see them coming and going.”

“And now that I gotta find me a job,” offered Terri, “I’ll be moving in and out of the Projects a lot. I can do a lot of eavesdropping myself. Maybe I’ll run into the bitch a few times and scare the shit outta her.”

“No, no, Terri” Madya shook her head, “Rosie’s right. You gonna get in trouble if you hit that woman. Maybe she’s got herself a gun. I got me plenty. No, we all keep an eye on that house. You can snoop around when you come in and out, but the best person to watch little Noel, is my Roxy.”

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As they walked away from the Bridger bungalow, Madya explained to the women that Roxy had the *gift*. Even as a small child, she had her old grandmother’s gift of *knowing*, which she explained, was much greater than mere psychic powers. Many times, now, without knowing what it was, she had pointed in the direction of the Bridger place, mute for lack of words for her limited four-year-old vocabulary.... Now, the Gypsy woman declared with an element of drama, she understood that Roxy knew that poor Noel was in trouble.

“You don’t have the gift?” Rosie asked, as they stood amongst the bellowing sheets.

“No, I can read cards and tea leaves, but not that,” Madya said sadly. “But I can interpret much of her feelings. One time she was carrying on something fierce, and by trial and error, using a piece of chalk and blackboard, I figured out that her uncle Roman was having a heart attack.”

“Did you save *him*?” Terri asked bluntly.

“No,” she confessed, “Roman, who lives in New York, died that very night.”

“Oh dear,” Maureen held her face.

“Well, Madya,” Rosie was filled with purpose, “what now?”

“How about some tea,” the Gypsy’s stony expression broke into a smile that beguiled them all.

“Sure!” Rosie, Maureen and Ruth all seemed to say at once.

“You got any coffee,” Terri made a face.

As they followed Madya to her project, they wondered what they would find in her shadowy house. It was common, though incorrect, knowledge that Madya practiced the black arts. Ruth believed she was a witch. When they entered her house, however, they were surprised to find paintings of Mary, Jesus, and several Roman Catholic saints on the walls. The strange odors they expected to find in her spooky apartment wafted in the air, and yet there were prayer-hand bookends on each side of a large bible sitting on a circular table and religious objects sitting in various corners of the main room.

“Let me make you my special tea,” she cackled. “I have something to show you.”

“Don’t be adding any of your medicinal roots,” Terri replied half-seriously.

“What does she want to show us?” Ruth muttered nervously. “Her *cauldron*?”

“I don’t think Madya’s a witch.” Lois patted her wrist. “She’s just strange.”

“I’m impressed with her religious stuff,” said Rosie, gazing around the room. “Look at all those statues and that big bible. She’s got more pictures of Mary and Jesus than me.”

When Madya returned from the tiny kitchen that was found in all of the project bungalows, Roxy was assisting her with a tray of cups, as her mother carried a large teapot into the room. After setting the pot down on a small table, she waited for Roxy to set the cups and saucers before her guests, and then poured every one a cup of tea. After dismissing Roxy with a pat on her head, she sat down in a large, high-backed chair befitting a matriarch, and motioned with a nod for everyone to take a sip.

“What is this?” Terri made a face. “It tastes weird.”

“I think it’s delicious,” Maureen said, after doctoring it up with cream and sugar.

Unruffled Madya replied, “It’s sassafras tea. Terri doesn’t like it, but Maureen has turned it into a European espresso. Rosie, Lois, Ruth, and I are drinking it straight up like good whiskey”

“What were you going to show us?” Terri came straight to the point.

“Oh yes,” Madya replied, setting down her cup. “Roxy,” she called blithely, “bring me Alba’s kit.”

“Alba’s kit?” muttered Ruth. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Hush!” Rosie placed a finger before her lips.

In barely a moment, Roxy trudged into the room carrying a brightly colored box.

“My-my,” Lois said with a grin, “that box is almost as big as you.”

“This isn’t witchy stuff?” Terri blurted, as she sat it down on the table. “Those look like devil signs to me!”

“They’re not witches symbols nor signs of Satan,” Madya reassured her, lifting off the lid. “I’m a Christian woman, who respects the old religion for its benefits to mankind. This box and its contents were given to me by Alba, a matriarch of the Romani people.”

“Who’re the Romani?” Rosie tilted her head quizzically. “That sounds like Italian.”

“It’s the ancient name of my people,” explained Madya. “It means simply ‘man.’ There are Gypsies almost everywhere in Europe and the United States. I never liked the word Gypsy. I looked it up once. European people thought our ancestors came from Egypt because of their dark skin, but the truth is we came from India in the sixth century. After hundreds of years we’re almost everywhere, even in Australia and New Zealand. I’m happy being called an American like you Rosie.”

“So, who’s this person, Alba?” Lois asked bluntly. “I’ve never met anyone around here with that name.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Madya smiled at her. “She is more traditional than Roxy and me. Her people live in the wagons you see in the vacant lot near the bridge.”

“Oh, you mean them squatters,” Terri snickered. “I heard they were a bunch of cutthroats and thieves.”

“Once,” Madya paused to lecture Terri, “everyone was a nomad—people wandering around and looking for game to feed their families. Gradually they squatted in various places and settled down. Many of my fellow Romani have not settled down yet. Some of them might be cutthroats and thieves but so are other Americans.”

“Yeah, Terri,” Rosie glared at her. “Many Italians, my people, are mobsters. That don’t mean I’m one.”

”Let’s get on with it.” Maureen motioned impatiently. “What’s in the box?”

Madya looked around the group and prefaced her statement: “That poor little boy won’t survive those people. What I have here will protect him the rest of his life.”

“So, show us already.” Ruth threw up her hands.

“Have you heard of the Gypsy rose?” she asked, presenting ajar.

They studied the rose floating in the jar. It looked like any ordinary red rose.

“That looks like one of them flowers in front of Noel’s bungalow,” observed Maureen.

“Precisely,” Madya said, reaching in to extract the rose. “It belongs to the person, whom I must curse.”

“And how do you do that?” Lois cocked an eyebrow.

“The water in which I immersed the rose is sacred, blessed by Alba—a Romani seer, who used Christianity mixed with the old religion to help her people—”

“Wait a minute,” Ruth raised her hand. “I don’t like the sound of this.”

“Me neither,” exclaimed Maureen.

“Madya,” Rosie shook her head in dismay, “we’re god-fearing women. This sounds like black magic. How you gonna perform this curse?”

“Listen,” Madya snapped, rolling her eyes. “Get it through your thick skulls. I’m not a witch. Did you see all my pictures and my bible? I can quote scripture if you wish.”

“Hah!” Terri snorted. “That don’t mean nothin. I don’t know *any* scripture, but I know witchcraft when I hear it.”

“Yeah,” agreed Maureen. “It sounds like witchcraft to me?”

“Let-me-finish!” Madya cried succinctly. “Open your Judeo-Christian minds! The curse will not harm anyone, only put them on the right path. I would never use Alba’s potion to kill or maim. I’ll use it just to wake them up.”

“You mean Noel’s parents?” Lois eyed her with suspicion.

“Yes, of course,” she nodded. “Can I please finish?”

“I don’t believe *any of this?*” Terri looked at her friends. “You really believe this shit?”

“Yeah,” Maureen bobbed her head, “I heard about these people. They got fortunetellers and palm readers. Why not witches.”

“For the last time,” Madya exploded, “*I’m not a witch!*”

“Come on girls,” chided Rosie, “give her a chance. Madya’s just trying to help.”

After a moment of silence, the Gypsy woman took a petal from the rose and, pulling out a vial, which seemed to materialize out of thin air, placed the petal inside. During this procedure, the five women grew fascinated much as onlookers watching a snake charmer or practitioner of the black arts. Blowing on the vial, she shook it vigorously, and consecrated it with an ancient Gypsy blessing. The words she spoke were mumbled. When Terri tried to interrupt in order to ask her what she was saying, Rosie elbowed her in the ribs.

“It’s Romani,” Madya explained. “To complete the spell, I’ll need my crystal ball.”

“Dear God,” Ruth groaned, “I want no part of this.”

Ruth started to rise but found herself drawn to the conclusion of the spell. Terri, who tried to make fun of Madya’s actions, giggled hysterically, while Maureen, Lois, and Rosie seemed frozen in their chairs. Roxy, apparently signaled by Madya, appeared again carrying the crystal ball, which she sat down reverently before her mother. What followed transformed even the skeptic Terri into a believer. Almost immediately, as Madya moved her hands over the crystal, an image appeared in the glass: Noel sitting alone on the floor, sucking his thumb, a lost expression on his tear-stained face. That fateful moment, perfectly timed for her purposes,

Noel's father returned earlier than normal from his job at the Railroad. A pipe protruded from his scowling face as he entered the bungalow. A voice in the background, was shouting, "I can't potty train him. He's not like Aaron. That time Aaron dropped him must've addled his brain."

"I'll potty-train him," his father swore. "A few good swats are what he needs!"

"Those bastards!" shrieked Terri. "Give'em hell, Madya."

Pausing to pour the vial on the crystal ball, Madya mumbled more Romani, and lapsed briefly into English. "Kalbeliya, protector of children, with the Christian god's blessing, send a curse for his tormentors. The next time his parents attempt to beat him, they will be stricken. The offending hand will burn like fire. The offending voice will grow mute. The offending eyes will feel as if dust had been thrown in their face."

With wide, unblinking eyes, they watched as Madya, poured more rose water onto the crystal ball and mumbled more unintelligible words. The women sensed that Madya was practicing the old Gypsy religion but said nothing until she finished her chant. After a moment of silence, in which, Madya prayed mutely, they erupted into chatter.

"That-that's fantastic," Terri sputtered. "How'd you do it? Was it a trick? How'd you get those little people inside that globe?"

"That wasn't no trick," Rosie murmured in awe. "That was magic. Those magicians, palm-readers, and fortune-tellers we saw in the circus last summer were all fakes. They use slight of hand and trickery, but Madya has great power!"

"Yes," Maureen nodded, "if she's not a witch, she's a wizard."

"I wish I could see it happen," muttered Lois. "Just for a few moments, I'd like to be a fly on their wall."

"Why do we have to wait?" Ruth posed the question. "Give'em hell now!"

Gazing into her crystal ball, Madya cackled with glee, "Say no more, my friends. Gather around—behold!"

As if to demonstrate all three parts of the Gypsy curse upon Noel's parents, his mother reached down to rap his head as she often did, and immediately recoiled.

"Owe!" she howled. "Must be static electricity."

Reaching down as if to test her hypothesis, she received another jolt that caused her to scream angrily down at the boy, but as she opened her mouth, her voice caught in his throat. In fact, when she tried to speak again, she felt a burning in her throat, as if she was stricken with laryngitis. As the five women watched in amazement, Noel's mother rubbed her eyes, which smarted after the evil look she gave her son.

In the background, behind his gyrating wife, his father was screaming, "What's wrong? Have you gone crazy? What happened to your voice? Why're you rubbing your eyes?"

Experimentally it appeared, Noel's father reached down to touch him and received a slight jolt. Withdrawing his hand quickly, he backed away in fear. That moment, as the little boy stood up, and cracked a beguiling smile, he seemed to stare out of orb at his audience. While the mother ran into the bathroom to rinse her eyes, Noel's father looked down at him with newfound respect.

"You really did it, Madya," Rosie declared light-headedly. "You put a spell on them. It really worked!"

"Ho, ho" crowed Terri, "those sons-of-bitches will think twice before they mess with Noel!"

"But it's not natural," cried Ruth, "it's not religious. She did that with magic, not prayer."

“Madya!” Maureen shook her arm. “Will this follow Noel the rest of his life or will it only happen in his childhood? This is an important detail. Please answer.”

Madya remained silent. For several moments the five women chattered amongst themselves. As Madya sat in her high-backed chair looking down at her orb, however, the crystal ball clouded and returned to its translucent state. Lois touched it reverently, as if it was a sacred thing. Roxy ran back into the room now. “It’ll do no good,” she held out her hands pleadingly. “The orb is empty now. My mother must rest.”

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Maureen, Rosie, Terri, Lois, and Ruth left the bungalow, united in their concern for Noel, but fearful of what they had unleashed.

“You call her what you want to,” Ruth muttered faintly, “but that woman’s a witch!”

“Yeah.” Terri nodded dreamily. “That ain’t no lie.”

“No,” Rosie replied thoughtfully, “she said she wasn’t it. Maybe she’s a wizard, like Merlin. Witches are evil.

“Yeah,” Lois agreed hesitantly, “. . . Madya’s got Noel’s best interest at heart.”

“The question is,” Maureen exhaled uneasily, “‘how long will the spell last?’ and ‘will little Noel zap his playmates someday?’ What about when he grows up and zaps a co-worker or his *wife*?”

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By now the children had returned home from school, hungry and out of sorts. Because Lois, Maureen, and Ruth’s husbands were coming home from work at this hour, the women returned home to be with their families. Terri returned home to an empty house and unfinished fifth of gin; except for her friendship with her neighbors her future seemed bleak. With Alphonso at work, Rosie fixed her children supper, and then, when her children were in bed, slipped out of her bungalow and made her way, flashlight in hand, to the Bridger house. Standing there a moment, she listened carefully for several moments, and then, hearing only quiet murmurs, retraced her steps, satisfied that Madya’s curse had worked.

In the weeks and months ahead, a bond of camaraderie, they would share their experience in Madya’s house. Though, after the war, their families would move away to distant towns, they would remain lifelong friends. For the rest of his life, the elixir of the Gypsy Rose would protect Noel against his parents; this they didn’t doubt. What had concerned them after Maureen brought it up, was how Noel might use the curse. Madya had given him great power. Even now, after only a few days of seeing their reactions after each hostile look or word, Noel grew in this knowledge. As he grew older, he would experiment by breaking one of his mother’s favorite ceramics or shattering one of his father’s pipes, delighting at the sight of them blinking or trying to speak. No longer did they trifle with him physically, except to cater to his needs. Eventually, the hard, mean words vanished completely, the harsh looks vanished completely, and were replaced by honeyed tones, circumspect looks, and a gentle touch. If a playmate mistreated him, he would never do it again. Bullies and teases shunned him, and he became the protector of the meek. If a teacher scolded him, his punishment came swiftly as it did for anyone else bringing on his ire. All it took was a mean word or look, and God help anyone who touched him in anger. They would instantly suffer the Gypsy’s curse!

## The Mad Bomber

Omar Hammid had but one mission in life. After so many setbacks and the success of the new American President and his allies to stamp out terrorism, all his lofty dreams of a jihad and sharia-centered world were reduced to a goal of vengeance against the chief aggressor: the United States. The last president had made matters easy for the Jihadists, such as himself. The president's only concern was appeasing his party and the voters, who were reluctant to enter another Middle Eastern War. Now, there was a hawkish, no-nonsense leader in the White House, who proclaimed to the world his aim to wipe terrorism from the face of the earth. The USA—a sleeping giant—had finally awakened. The latest poll showed that sixty-five percent of Americans favored a strong military response to end terrorism's threat. With the exception of his co-conspirators Abdul Amman and Bagrad Zawadi, the terror cell in which he belonged knew nothing of his plans. They had, because of defeat and despair, become, like all other Jihadists, soft in his way of thinking. It was time to regroup, the supreme leaders would say, to plan their next moves before they were wiped out entirely. Cowards! Fools! Omar thought with great bitterness. It was time for Allah's Avengers, as he fancied their splinter group, to take matters into their own hands. Today, as his own plan was set into motion, he was taking the first step.

As he stood in front of the United States Capitol building, looking up at this great Edifice, he appeared, with his Anglo-Saxon features and new name (Stuart Hamilton), to be just one more tourist with a camera. No one was the wiser. As part of a group scheduled to visit the White House, he looked like any gawking tourist. Because of the high state of security in this country, he could take pictures of the outside of the Capitol but never snapshots inside the building. In this age, no one was above suspicion. Though shots of the exterior were important, he dare not try taking pictures on the sly, as many tourists did. It wasn't worth the risk, so he tucked the small digital camera into his shirt pocket—in plain sight for White House security. Through his spectacles, his mind's eye would be his camera. His memory, which had served him well in the past, would store away all the nooks and crannies of the Capitol Building, and, in the security of his small apartment, use it for the master plan developing in his head.

In the past, Jihadists had concentrated on easy-to-sabotage public Edifices, such as the World Trade Center in New York and, earlier, the Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma. The attack on the marathon runners in Boston was done by lone wolves, not associated with ISIS and Al Qaida—the chief Jihadist organizations. There were two wars between the Trade Center bombing and today and countless acts of terror in the name of Allah. The vast majority of law-abiding Muslims, however, suffered because of the backlash caused by Jihadists. When an Islamic State was declared in Iraq by these fanatics, and a new war was ignited by their atrocities, it looked as though Christians, Jews, and Shiites would be wiped out in the Middle East. The previous administration remained disengaged with reality, focusing upon domestic issues and his campaign promise to keep the United States out of war. Occupied with its own problems and a resurgent Russia, Europe likewise offered meager assistance to the embattled Muslim countries facing the Jihad.... And then the new president stepped onto the stage, reversing the pacifistic policies of his predecessor. A reluctant Europe joined Canada and Great Britain in support of the US president. Matters changed drastically for the Islamic State, when thousands of allied troops invaded the occupied areas and state.

It looked very much to Omar Hammid as if the infidels might soon crush the Islamic army. Once a sleeping giant, the United States had marshaled its allies into a mighty force of air, land, and even sea operations—a juggernaut intent on exterminating all elements of the Jihad. He knew that it was just a matter of time. They had, by their threats to destroy the American people and needless public slaughters, shaken the Americans awake. According to his co-religionists, the conscience of Islam had been prickled. They, too, were awakened at last. But in Omar's fanatical mind, the Jihad was still on. His own people had sold them out. Who could blame believers who couldn't see the bigger picture as he did? Overkill was the great enemy of terrorists. Their onetime leaders, as if they had forgotten what terrorism was intended to do, had gone to such excesses they alienated moderate factions of Islam and even the ayatollahs of Iran.

One of the most important factors of the cause, all Jihadists knew, was surprise, veiled in initial secrecy. More importantly, each attack had to count, causing both numerical and symbolic damage. Those fools in his own cell, who went overboard and blew up anything in sight, invited their own destruction. Collateral damage had been accepted as a necessary evil, but more recently, during the ISIS and Boko Haram atrocities, this term became meaningless. Their purpose was to kill *all* infidels, regardless of whom they were. Everyone, from the highest official down to children and infants were fair game. The lessons of history had been ignored. Mohammed didn't murder children. He gave the infidels a chance to change religion and, if they refused—pht!—off went their heads. That was fair, was it not? Omar asked himself. The problem with all the so-called lone wolves and the new brand of terrorism itself was that it no longer had discipline and clarity. More importantly for the Islamic State, in general, it had become an open book. It lacked surprise. The gambler's adage, "never show your hand," Omar had always followed, had been forgotten as they went about indiscriminately attacking infidels, allowing the enemy time prepare and gather its forces. Now it appeared as if the whole world—not just the Americans, Europeans, and Arab States, were at war with Muslim extremists, including his own small group. From Indonesia to Africa, governments had risen up after inciting their people to stamp out Jihadism.

Now, Omar told himself with great bitterness, the United States Government, the chief aggressor, must be punished. The world would realize that Jihad wasn't dead, when his own cell, the Avengers for Allah, struck. Each month to rev up enthusiasm and the esprit de corps of the American people for both domestic and military issues, the President presided over congress. Next month, the chief executive would be speaking again to congress on the subject of terrorism, the economy, and the latest immigration disasters. The American infidel leaders had their chance to recant Christianity and Judaism. Omar and his cohorts would get them all this time—the President, Vice President, the cabinet, and both Houses of Congress—in one great blast.

At least this is what Omar thought. You see, Omar Hammid was quite mad. His cohorts Abdul Amman and Bagrad Zawadi had come to realize this. It was a hopeless, they believed, an insane idea that would bring Omar certain and swift death, but Abdul and Bagrad feared Oman; he threatened to kill anyone, including them, if they interfered with his plans. So, until they could slip away on the sly, they played along with his enterprise, not believing for a moment he could pull it off.

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As the terrorists sat in Omar's tiny apartment, Abdul and Bagrad pretended to be enthusiastic about the enterprise, listening with mounting fear and anxiety to a plan that sounded very much like the ramblings of a lunatic.

"It's so very simple," he babbled, slurping his coffee. "There's no way for them to know. Metal detectors, x-ray, and even full body search won't detect it. After swallowing the device, which is non-metallic, it will look like undigested food in my stomach. You see *I am the bomb!*" "Voila!" He did a pirouette. "Instant Paradise. I will have a harem of seventy virgins, a palace, and live forever as a martyr of the Jihad!"

"And what will we be doing while you blow yourself up?" Abdul tried not to sound sarcastic. "Your mother was a Swede; you have her genes. We look like Arabs. Those Hispanic-sounding names on our passports won't convince the secret service if we're caught. I don't speak Spanish; neither does Bagrad. They'll take one look at us and pat us down. When they hear our Arab accents, it's all over!"

"Are you afraid, Abdul?" Omar snarled. "What happened to that fire I once saw in your eyes?" "And you Bagrad?" He turned to the third terrorist. "You look like you pissed in your pants!"

Bagrad shook his head. "It's not dying for Allah that bothers me, Omar. You're going to blow yourself up after swallowing a C-4 packet? To avoid metal detectors, we can't even carry weapons. You expect us to run interference by charging through the visitor line up the steps—without guns! What kind of plan *is that?*"

"It's a brilliant plan," Omar snarled defensively. "Do you have a better one?"

"Yes." He blanched from an imaginary blow. "*Don't do it!*"

"Coward! Your words betray the cause!" Omar began swatting Bagrad with a newspaper on hand.

Abdul now grabbed his hand and scolded him. "That's enough, Omar. Shame on you! Bagrad is our friend. You have badgered us and threatened us, but you can't beat us. We're in this equally. If we leave you, you'll have to do this by yourself. We're all you have left!"

"Yes, Omar," exclaimed Bagrad. "If I have to die for Allah, I want it to matter. Your insane plan is doomed to failure!"

On that note, Bagrad, gripped the newspaper, pulled out of Omar hand, and through it across the room.

"What? Is this a mutiny?" cried Omar. "You expect me to do this alone?" "Where's my gun. I'll blow your brains out—you cowardly swine!"

Turning on him now, his partners wrestled him to the floor, and, after a few well-placed blows to his face, tied him up.

"You'll die for this!" shrieked Omar.

"Not before you," spat Abdul. "If you don't get shot on the scene, you'll blow yourself before you ever get in the building."

"I'll call Homeland Security anonymously and turn you in," Omar threatened. "You'll never make it out of Washington."

"Oh yes we will," Bagrad laughed sourly. "No one's looking for us. We'll look like tourists. Our passports show us as Mexican nationals. So that's where we're going? If we get caught, we'll be locked up. Without proof of terrorism, all the authorities can do is hold us until we're cleared or send us directly back to Iraq. It's better than dying a fool's death like you!"

“Filthy scum!” Omar shouted, as they departed. “Spineless jackals!”

“Better a live jackal than dead fool.” Bagrad replied in a singsong voice.

Upon leaving the apartment building, the two men agreed upon their own plan: they would beat Omar to the punch.

“Hello...” Abdul said in a disguised voice. “Homeland DC hotline?... I’m fine; how are you? Listen carefully ma’am. A lunatic who’s ingested a bomb will enter the Capitol Building. He plans to hide out in one of the closets or restrooms there, until the scheduled speech by the president in front of congress. When that begins, he intends to blow himself up and kill the nation’s leaders in one blast. He’s quite insane, but his mind’s made up. Thank you and goodbye... *Click!*”

“Now throw it away.” Bagrad pointed to his phone. “By the time they trace it, we’ll be long gone.” “So, we head south?” He looked at Omar for agreement.

“No,” Abdul shook his head, “that would insane. I told him that to get them on the wrong trail. We’ll drive into Virginia and lay low for a while. By then Omar will be in custody or more likely dead.”

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While Abdul and Bagrad made their getaway, Omar broke free finally, and it fit of unbridled fury grabbed the handgun he purchased from a gang-banger. “If the Feds don’t get them I’ll kill them!” he roared. “They’re a disgrace to Allah. They betrayed the cause!” Before he charged out the door, however, he took stock of himself, straightened his shoulders, and, with his bottle of infidel whiskey took a long, bracing swig. While he prepared himself, contemplating the dark deed ahead, Homeland Security was looking into the latest threat.

“Sir,” reported agent Margaret Millhouse, “we might want to check this out.”

“What does that make it now, Marge,” replied Assistant Deputy of Homeland Security Stuart Meyer, “one thousand, two thousand this week? Lately, they’re all pranks. What is it this time, Marge, another mad bomber or chemical terrorist? We’re spending all our resources hunting down and prosecuting these pranksters. Everything from Ebola rumors to remote control model plans are suspect.” “Let me have it, Marge,” he added gruffly. “So far you’re batting zero. Your last caller was a nine-year-old kid!”

Unruffled, in a condensed fashion, Margaret related the message received. “A man, who swallowed a bomb plans to blow up the president and congress tomorrow during the president’s speech. The caller hung up without a name. We traced the call to the DC area close to the Capitol building where the bomb will go off. That’s it, sir.”

“Ho, ho, ho,” Stuart guffawed, “that’s a new one. In the first place, Margaret, that’s impossible. In the second place, he won’t get one foot in the building. That place is will guarded, better than Fort Knox!”

“Oh, I forgot one detail.” She slapped her forehead. “He plans on hiding out in a closet or a restroom until tomorrow.”

The Assistant Deputy Director continued to chuckle. “Ho, ho, Margaret, that’s a great plan. Of course, he’s going to hide. Why didn’t I think of that?” “But Margaret,” his tone changed to mild irritation, “that’s ridiculous. The last tourist group enters the Capitol building in the next hour. You just got that tip, so our terrorist doesn’t have time.”

“No sir, that’s incorrect,” she disagreed. “He does have time. The last tour group is in the late afternoon.”

“Well,” he snorted, “it’s almost noon. He’d better hustle.”

”Sir,” she grew frustrate, “this is so ridiculous it could be real. We should at least call the Direct of Secret Service. The Capitol’s security should be notified.”

”Heighten the security? All right,” he acquiesced, “that sounds reasonable. You call the director. I’ll talk to the Capitol. In fact, I’ll send some of my people there. Keep this to yourself, however. The media would have a field day with this rumor.”

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When the calls were made, the reaction was predictable, and yet security was bolstered, not only at the Capitol Building but also the White House and all federal buildings throughout the US. While making their escape in a rent-a-car with the intent of hiding out in Virginia, the two one-time terrorists were stopped for speeding by a Ray Hernandez, a Virginia State Policeman. Because both their driver’s licenses looked strange to the patrolman and they were acting in a suspicious manner, he performed a simple test.

”¿Eres ciudadano de los Estados Unidos?” he asked the driver in Spanish.

”Si,” Abdul bobbed his head.

Having just asked him if he was a citizen of the United States, the officer studied the grinning man.

”Cuál es su destino?” (What is your destination?), he asked, his hand poised over his holster.

”Si,” Abdul nodded again, “mucho bueno.”

A red flag went up in Officer Hernandez’s mind. ”Gentleman, please step out of the vehicle.” He moved back and drew his weapon.

Without weapons, themselves, Abdul and Bagrad gave up meekly. Lying face down with their hands in back of them, they were handcuffed by the officer. Before continuing, he paused to call in backup. Then he bent down to pat them down. While the suspects were on the pavement, he ran their licenses and the vehicle’s plate number through the database.

”You’re offending our civil liberties,” Abdul protested in the background. “I’ll report this to our ambassador. Your American President will hear of this!”

Officer Ray Hernandez, who didn’t suffer fools, looked back with disgust. “You’re both idiots!” he mumbled aloud.

Not only were they carrying fake identification, but their car was registered to Enterprise Rentals under the name Abdul Amman—a red flag in itself. Using the patrol car’s camera, he took pictures of their driver licenses to obtain mug shots, which would be compared to suspected terrorists or other felons on file.

”This is an outrage,” Bagrad cried, “we’re law-abiding citizens. You’re treating us like criminals? We’ve done nothing wrong! ”

”Really?” He looked down scornfully. “You’re carrying fake identification. That’s a serious offense. You obviously have something to hide.”

The two men wriggled helplessly on the pavement. Suppressing a laugh, Officer Hernandez decided, just for good measure, to search the glove compartment, back seat area, and the trunk for hidden weapons, contraband, or drugs. In the crevice of the backseat, he discovered a crumpled joint of marijuana, and, in the trunk, he found a nearly empty bottle of Jim Beam, with just enough whiskey inside to count as a misdemeanor.

”Officer,” Abdul continued protesting, “there’s no law in changing our name. This is police brutality. I shall have your badge!”

“You dumb bastard!” He shook his head in disbelief. “It is too a law: Penal Code 470b PC. You didn’t have records. You could’ve used your own names. If you hadn’t left that joint in the car and that bottle, you’d be scott-free!”

The officer heard Bagrad groan, “We should never have listened to Omar. We were led by a mad man!” What he heard, however, was in Arabic, which made him even more suspicious of the men. When a second and third officer arrived on the scene, the suspects were secured in one of the patrol cars, still grumbling to each other. During the wait, Abdul had wet his pants. The second officer, Sergeant Frank Higgins, now listened intently to Officer Hernandez brief report from the database. Though there were no outstanding warrants or terror alerts on the men, they had been carrying fake identification and masquerading as Hispanics and had drugs and an open container of alcohol, certainly enough reason, the sergeant agreed, for bringing them in.

”All right Ray.” He nodded thoughtfully. “You did good. *We got cause!*” ”Anything you might’ve missed?”

“No,” Officer Hernandez said, looking back at the suspects’ vehicle. “I searched the car, their pockets, and ran a check. I caught the driver speeding; that’s why I pulled them over.”

“Wait a minute Frank.” He snapped his fingers. “Hold on a sec. There’s one more thing!”

Walking briskly over to the suspects’ car, he slipped on a pair of latex gloves, reached in to retrieve a map from the glove compartment, and then, trotting back quickly, presented it to the other men.

“Damn!” The third officer whistled under his breath. “That’s a map of the Capitol Building—one of those tourists’ pamphlets and some Arabic scrawled on top. Now we’re talking about cause!”

”Let’s get moving on this!” cried Sergeant Higgins excitedly. “These men might be terrorists. On the way back, I’m calling Homeland Security. Put them into a holding cell. Don’t wait for booking. This is a job for the *FBI!*”

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Officer Hernandez and the third officer climbed into the patrol car containing the suspects; while Sergeant Higgins led the way, sirens blaring, back to the station. As the junior officers discussed Abdul and Bagrad’s fate, the two suspects chattered fearfully amongst themselves. At the station things moved quickly now that the FBI and Homeland Security had been alerted. While the men waited for interrogation and the inevitable arraignment and potential court proceedings, the third, ‘phantom,’ suspect moved quickly. After ingesting the high-powered packet, he claimed would kill the President and his governing body in Congress, he hailed a taxi, and, with a queasy tummy, was on his way to the nation’s capital. The cab driver tried to chat with him during the trip, but Omar was in no mood for small talk. A fierce, fanatical look was on his face. His jaw was set tightly on his task. Any moment, he feared he might barf.

”You all right mister,” the cabby asked, looking into his rear-view mirror.

”Yes,” his passenger mumbled.

The cheerful look on the driver’s chocolate face changed suddenly to alarm when Omar groaned and held his mouth. ”Don’t you be pukin’ in my cab, sir,” he cried, pulling off the road. “I don’t want none of that Ebola. You get out of here—now, else I call a cop. You heard me, man—*git!*”

Realizing that he was a mere block from his destination, Omar complied, bending down almost immediately as the cab took off. Hoping that the packet wouldn’t be dislodged easily, he

prayed to Allah that the sensation would stop. Fortunately for him (or unfortunately for a sane man), the packet remained in his stomach, while everything else including a half bottle of whiskey was purged. As he staggered on his way, the cab driver drove straight to headquarters, fearful of what he might catch. On the other side of DC, the two suspects were booked ostensibly on drug position, Homeland Security finally returned the call, and Margaret Simpson, Hanson's assistant, chirped politely into the phone.

"...Yes ma'am," a lieutenant was reassuring her. "These two claim there's a mad bomber on the way to the Capitol."

"Yes, we heard about it on our voice mail," She said wearily. "We notified the Director of Homeland Security. The assistant director, my boss, is still talking to Capitol security. I've been on the phone myself. Now it's up to them." "What's going to happen to those fellows?" she asked almost off-handedly.

"Well, they don't have any records and aren't on the watch list, but they have fake id's, were caught with weed, and were carrying a map of the Capitol. That should be enough to hold them until arraignment."

The lieutenant gave Margaret all the details he had on the third terrorist. That he carried the bomb inside of him caused Hanson's assistant to gasp in the phone. This was so bizarre she sat there a few seconds staring into space, unable to reply. Had they not nabbed two additional suspects, it might have sounded like another false alarm, and yet it all seemed so absurd, she admitted to the lieutenant, it might just be true. Giggling hysterically, she dialed the assistant director's cell phone, thankful she was on the other side of town.

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When Omar reached the Capitol Building, he was exhausted from lack of sleep, sprinting almost deliriously up the steps. He scarcely remembered joining the tourist group. His head was swimming with fear and doubt. The trigger that would ignite the explosive inside of him was in his watch. They had checked his camera on his last visit. What if they checked his watch this time? Because it's hands were frozen, it didn't tell time and, in fact, functioned much like a butane lighter that would incriminate him immediately if he was caught. The sparking device, which had to be held to his abdomen, also required precise timing. He must somehow sneak into the congressional chambers—the maddest of follies, unless he was forced it detonate himself in the main hall. He must at the very least, he thought practically, kill the most infidels as possible.... Then it was paradise—Allah be praised!

The visitors who stood in line with him looked at him with contempt and panic. His eyes were bloodshot and he was sweating profusely. He tried to reassure them that he didn't have Ebola and had just ran across town to make it on time (the one thing he said that was the absolute truth), and yet two of them ran to inform security. At the very least, they complained, he had the flu or some other plague. A tall black man appeared with an infrared thermometer, took a reading of his temperature at a safe distance, shook his head, and then walked away. Certain that this was sign, Omar prayed silently again, thanking Allah and his good luck. He had passed the first hurdle to get in the building. Next, as they passed from the steps into the Capitol, they were searched by metal detector and also patted down. Placing both his camera and watch in the tray, he waited breathlessly, as he walked through the detector, glancing nervously at his items as they were scrutinized by the guards.

“Your watch appears to be broken,” commented a small redheaded bespeckled guard. “There’ll be no pictures inside today,” he reassured him. “You’ll get the camera when you leave.”

Hoping that the second issue canceled out the first in the guard’s mind, Omar nodded hesitantly as he waited for his watch to be returned. It seemed logical that they would begin confiscating cameras. Each camera, after all, could hide explosives. A watch, on the other hand, would be too small for such a device. Who could imagine that it was a triggering mechanism? Retrieving it quickly and slipping it onto his wrist, he mumbled something about the watch’s battery. By then, however, the man was questioning another tourist on another matter, which was drowned out by the beating of Omar’s heart. Realizing he had passed another hurdle in his plan to destroy the infidels, he prayed once more, adding special thanks for the stupidity of the Capitol Police.

As the tour guide, a petite woman, with short golden hair, led them into the great, circular hall, he looked around immediately for his chance. Somewhere and soon he must slip away to hide out until the next day. That would be his greatest hurdle until his final act.

The woman gave them a history of the Capitol building throughout American History, including its most recent remodeling, which included state of the art security, an added underground wing, and several features that became a blur in Omar’s crowded head. After her long-winded introduction, she began the official tour, pointing out statues, special offices, and architectural innovations, until finally leading them into the congressional chambers, itself. Catching his breath, Omar felt physically diminished in this room. It was everything he had read about and more: the heart of the chief infidel nation of the world. And yet the circular room, which seated five hundred congressmen and their attendants, was overshadowed by the dais on which the president would speak. He was, Omar’s dark mind believed, the filthy core, a man comparable to the Christian Antichrist in his Jihadist mind.

When the tour was almost through and the group was led back toward the great hall, he managed to be at the tail end, slipping down a corridor that was miraculously empty of security guards. Despite his good fortune, he panicked a moment as he planned his next move. Where were the restrooms or janitor’s closets in this building, he wondered, as he scanned frantically up and down the hall? When he spotted the transgender sign with the male/female figures, he snarled with contempt as he snuck in, found a stall, and sat down to do the second honest action of the day: empty his bowels. The packet was too big to pass into his intestines, and yet he was fearful his calculations might be wrong. For an excruciating period of time, as one person after another, including two women, used the out-of-the-way restroom, he suffered both discomfort and defilement. His hatred for the American infidels was now greater than ever. Omar didn’t know that there were both men and women facilities in the building. Nevertheless, his discovery of the transgender restroom in the Capitol proved that the infidels were decadent and deserved extinction.

Those hours, in which the Capitol was closed to tourists, he wondered if heads had been counted when the tour group exited the building. If so, where they looking for him now? Would they find him hiding in this stall? It occurred to him finally how utterly insane was his obsession. Neither Al Qaida nor ISIS were privy to his exploit; after the new President and his allies’ success against the Islamic State, they no longer sponsored lone wolves with harebrained plans. The word had gone out: Jihadists must see the bigger picture; their actions must count. Even his friends had abandoned him. The queasiness he had felt earlier was compounded

by hunger and thirst as the hours passed. In his lonely stall, unable to wash his hands for fear of being caught, he remained, comforted only by his fanatical faith and personal Jihad.

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The following morning found Omar in dire straits. Hunger was a minor issue. He was ill. At times he felt as if he might pass out. That same hour, Abdul and Bagrad were being questioned again by the agents from Homeland Security and the FBI, both men resigned to their fate. While they suffered at the hands of the infidels, Omar would try to blow himself up. They had told their story and no longer cared. A wise Islamic sage once said, “Better to live as a coward than die as a fool.” That a man had swallowed a packet of high-grade explosive sounded so silly to his interrogators, they found it laughable. Despite the absurdity of the claim, they would act upon the threat, and lock up the third terrorist’s associates until a trial date was set. For their part, the Director of Homeland Security and his minions, having done their best to alert the White House of the urgency for extra security and having also notified the Capitol Police, likewise went about their business. Though they proceeded expeditiously, no one took the story seriously. Memories of 9-11, the Oklahoma bombing, the Boston Marathon massacre, and countless other incidents of terrorist attacks in the United States and the world should have overshadowed this trifling ‘non-event.’ The ongoing brutality of the Islamic State, Russian aggression, and Chinese cyber-attacks—in the long run much more serious forms of terrorism seemed just too awesome for most people to conceive.

To a few conscientious minds, the nagging concern generated by the preposterous claim of Abdul and Bagrad lingered much as a fly buzzing over the dung pile of crime and terror. There were just too many other criminal activities and real threats to consider for the government that required immediate attention and the taxpayers’ money, and yet Margaret Simpson, the assistant to the Assistant Director had slept poorly last night. All she could think of were the story given by the two men now in custody. When she asked a forensic specialist about the possibility of a person swallowing an explosive, he said it was possible, but it would be such a small explosion it would have little effect. On the other hand, he admitted, if someone could do such a thing—which, considering the normal gag reflex and the fact it might very well be toxic, seems highly unlikely, there are more powerful explosives than C-4—several experimental explosives in fact. The odds of anyone pulling it off therefore depended upon this fact and the culprit’s physical and mental strength. No ordinary, sane person would even attempt such a foolhardy act. Weighing his words with what she had heard from the DC Police, FBI, and her own people, she felt her uneasiness fade, lingering as troubling reminder of the bizarre methods of lone wolf terrorists. There had been attempted shoe bombers, underwear bombers, and now, if she believed Abdul and Bagrad, a ‘stomach’ bomber... What would they think of next?

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On the day of the President’s speech in front of Congress, Margaret, like millions of other Americans, were in front of the television, expecting him to give another rousing, patriotic pitch. His unconventional, down-to-earth method contrasted the partisan professorial method of the previous presidents whose action and non-action had, according to seventy-five percent of the public, caused all the crises of today. The most recent economic indicators had already shown improvement under the new president’s measures and there had been significant military successes against the Jihadists. And yet the job was unfinished—economically, socially, and militarily. There were still problems with the economy and disaffection among minority and

ethnic groups. The threat of Russia, China, and Jihadists was offset by a new fence on the border—one of the president’s most important visible achievements that proved that he meant business. A marked reduction in non-terrorist related crime resulting from his no-nonsense attitude had helped him in his recent re-election, and yet, with the memory of so many terrorist acts and constant media reminders of the ongoing Middle Eastern war, the Americans, along with other Western Nations, many of the president’s one-time adversaries, and even supporters remained fearful and concerned by his ‘cowboy’ and ‘shoot-from-the-hip’ style. As he began his speech in front of congress and the nation, this group, unlike the vast majority, sat on the Edge of their seats.

“Ladies and gentleman of the Senate, Congress, Mister Speaker, members of the cabinet, honored guests, and, above all the nation of whom we serve, I come here today to remind you of our socio-economic and military goals—all of which we share with the free world. I’m therefore speaking not only to the Americans but everyone who share my vision of an earth free of terrorism and bully nations, working together socially and economically, and striving to make the world a safer place for our children, grandchildren, and the whole human race! At the same time, I am speaking to our enemies—you know who you are. Whether through terrorist acts, territorial aggression against their neighbors, or cyber-attacks, understand one thing: we’re united against you. The might of the free world will prevail against the forces of darkness. I mince no words. We will crush the Jihad—the most evil of our foes. All lone wolves in America, who sponsor or conduct terrorist acts will be hunted down and be dealt with like the cockroaches they are. I’m personally putting you on notice all rogue nations working against our free way of life, with the full cooperation with our allies. An act of aggression against one of us is an act of aggression against us all. The mess made in the last administration is being cleaned up. Its failed healthcare system and damaged economy will take time to heal. But our military couldn’t wait. The Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, and Coast Guard have been bolstered by more men, more guns, more ships, more bombs, and a green light to hunt down our enemies when they threaten our security. Theodore Roosevelt once said we should speak softly but carry a big stick. Well, Theodore was wrong. That logic implied diplomatic impotency by cow towing to belligerent nations. No one took us seriously. You don’t wait for battle or war and then hit them with your big stick. You warn them first—loudly, not softly. You warn them once more and then bam! you hit them with your big stick and if that doesn’t work bam! you hit them again.”

Overwhelming applause erupted in the chamber. In front of the television screen, folks clapped their hands and high-fived each other. Others, a small minority, shook their heads in dismay. Omar Hammid, who could hear the speech from the speaker placed in one corner of the restroom, had been struggling to his feet. Even now, with so little time left to perform his act of terrorism, he took time to wash his hands before emerging from into the corridor. With his watch in one hand, ready at any moment to trigger the device inside his stomach, he tried looking nonchalant as he entered the main hall. As the president resumed his speech, he simply followed his voice. Louder and louder it became as he approached House of Congress.

He prayed once more. As if God was actually supporting his action, in fact, he chatted with him deliriously, as if he were listening, not suspecting how repugnant his action might be perceived: “Yes, Allah, you have guided my steps and guarded my crusade...Now the infidels will be reminded of your glory and might! You were with us that day on 9-11 and on the battlefields of Syria and Iraq. You will be with us again—here now on Jihad’s greatest day!” He rambled on about the glories awaiting him, praising Allah for his success so, as if

oblivious to his surroundings. Light-headedly, suffering from stomach pains and fighting back flu-like symptoms of nausea and discomfort, the lone wolf Omar managed, after whispering another prayer himself, to reach the chamber doors, even slipping past two Capitol Police officers, before he was ordered to halt.

The guard's deep voice immediately caught the president in mid-sentence. With amazing composure, the president, adlibbed with the remark, "Hark! Friend or foe?" "Foe!" Omar shouted hoarsely. "Allāhu Akbar!" he added, as he dashed frantically down the aisle. With his last ounce of fanatical fury, as he surged toward the dais, he heard the faint hum of silencer, and then another. If it hit the packet he would explode. This had been calculated into his plan if his initial effort failed. The first and second shots had penetrated his lung and liver, though, and missed his stomach. Excruciating pain stopped him cold, and yet he was only a few meters from the dais. As he fumbled with his watch to press it against his abdomen and trigger the bomb, he failed to hear the third shot, crumbling like a rag doll onto the floor. The bullet entered his brain. After that there was nothing. No paradise... No seventy virgins or reward in heaven...not even darkness. Omar, the mad bomber had ceased to exist.

Gathering his composure, the president looked out at his audience and summed up his speech, which had been cut short. "You see how close that was, folks.... Even the leader of the free world can be brought down. The lone wolves of Jihad still lurk everywhere. We must stand together against fanatics and tyranny. We're one people in this endeavor—not Americans, Europeans, Africans, or Asians. That poor fool will be followed by others. Whether organized or acting alone, we must stamp them out like the human cockroaches they are. Be always vigilant. Unite against those who would make us slaves to their will. Fight tyranny! Fight terrorism! Fight injustice! Stand against ISIS, Al Qaida, and all Jihadists who wish to take away force their values upon us and take away our freedom." "If they won't listen to reason and threaten us," he cried, raising his gavel and slamming it down, "bam! bam! bam! Remember this sound. Words don't work on this kind of enemy. We owe it to our families, children, and grandchildren to be vigilant and not faint-hearted. Under the last President, the police and military were coached to be politically correct. Even the word 'terrorism' was considered improper. But this didn't work. The last four years has seen a degrading of the enemy's power. Our ground troops are making great progress against them, but there much more left to do. As our army, marines, navy, and air force lock with the forces of darkness, Homeland Security, the FBI, and local law enforcement must root out lone wolves such as that man—mercilessly, without political correctness, with swift justice before they do more harm. From the shadows, they came doing the Devil's work. It's time to send them all back to Hell!"

Cheers and excited shouts rose up. A dead man laid in the aisle surrounded by Capitol police officers, and yet the president had struck a chord with congressmen and senators in both parties. Several of the men and women, in fact, kicked the corpse and spat on it. America had its fill of terrorist creeps like Omar. Liberal minds were offended by the callousness of their actions, but, unlike the audience of the previous president, there were no protests this time. An immediate poll showed that eighty-five percent of the viewers approved of the president. A new bulletin flashed on the bottom of the screen, so as not to interrupt the speech, informing the public of the attempt on the president's life. Nothing was said about a 'human bomb' and the identity of the man awaited further investigation. No one could see the pained expressions on the police officers that shot him dead.

"He wasn't armed," the first police officer murmured. "We shot an unarmed man."

“We didn’t have time,” the second shooter replied. “He could’ve had a bomb strapped to him. I’m glad he didn’t. He would’ve blown us all up!”

“Look.” A police woman pointed. “There’s something in his hand...It’s a watch. That could’ve been the trigger.”

Not knowing how close to the truth, she was, she shrugged in disappointment. “There’s no bomb attached to him. He wasn’t armed!”

A senator, who had once been a physician, had been checking his vital signs, pronouncing mock reverence, “Dead as a door nail!” As the president was escorted out the back way, he glanced down from the dais as the dead man.

“What was his name?” he asked, a snarl playing on his face.

“There’s no identification on him, Mister President,” the first police officer responded grimly. “He didn’t have a weapon.”

While the president retreated with his security team, the dead man was placed on a gurney and carried out a less public corridor of the Capitol. Before this point, reporters and cameramen had been ushered out of the building, with reassurances that the man had carried a detonating device. As the entire building was evacuated as a precaution, Capitol police officers scolded the inquisitive reporters as they attempted to question witnesses, but not in time to prevent many news teams from gaining eyewitness accounts of the shooting. When viewers’ television screens shifted to news anchors reporting the event, several brief interviews were shown, followed by summations by reporters of what witnesses claimed: a suspected suicide bomber, shouting “Allāhu Akbar,” entered the congressional chamber and was shot dead. Footage from the video cameras inside the chamber caught the actual attack but was immediately sequestered by Homeland Security. Because the man wasn’t carrying a gun and there were no explosives strapped to his chest, it might be incriminating. What viewers needed to understand was that an attempt had been made by a Jihadist on the president’s life. Considering the history of lone wolf attacks and terrorism in general, this sounded reasonable enough.

No one could have imagined what a DC coroner found during the autopsy of Omar Hammid. After opening him up in what began as a routine autopsy, the coroner began the grimy business of inspecting his entrails.

“Slight case of overkill,” commented his assistant. “I counted twenty slugs.”

“Twenty-three,” the chief coroner replied, extracting one more, “but this fellow would’ve died without being pumped full of lead. There’s massive damage to his esophagus and stomach lining...” “Son-of-a-bitch!” He drew back, his arms forcing his assistant back protectively, his face frozen in terror.

“Where’s that Homeland Security agent?” He looked around at his team.

“He turned green and ran out of the room.” An attendant stepped forward. “I’ll go chase him down.”

When the young man was ushered into the room, he was still pale, an expectant look growing on his face, and yet the coroner’s expression changed from alarm to relief as he looked down at the corpse.

“What’s up doc?” the young man tried to sound glib. “I had to take a leak.”

“You were sick agent Fredericks,” the coroner said gravely. “This is a nasty job. I found something in this man’s stomach: a packet. Unless I’m mistaken, I just found our bomb.”

“Shouldn’t we call the bomb squad?” The agent pulled out his phone.

“Not yet. That was my first instinct.” The coroner sighed. “Show Mister Fredericks the watch CSI claims is a triggering device.” He motioned to his assistant.

Agent Fredericks inspected the watch and shrugged.

“It’s a watch,” he mumbled, “a broken watch. The hands are frozen in place. Where’s the device?”

“That’s the difference between CSI and you feds,” the coroner chuckled grimly. “You guys are amateurs. I heard how you messed up the crime scene. You rushed in like a bull in a China shop, instead of waiting for the forensic team to arrive. You were lucky you didn’t blow yourselves up. Now the president and his security squad can breathe easy.”

Reaching in ever so carefully, he extracted the packet. “Obviously this lunatic had planned on igniting this explosive using his watch.”

Demonstrating to the disbelieving eyes of the agent how it worked. He drew back to a safe distance and, holding the watch with a pair of pliers, pointed it away from himself, and, with a small hammer, banger the screw. A flame shot out, reminiscent of the light on fire starters and cigarette lighters.

The agent shook his head. “That would’ve burned his hand.”

“What did he care?” The coroner snickered. “He was going to blow himself up.”

“But it’s so tiny,” the agent made a face. “That would just make a mess—splatter him all over the place.”

“Au contraire.” The coroner wagged a finger. “Not if he was right next to the president. I have a hunch that’s what he had in mind. If this is one of those new brands of explosives it might have killed them all!”

The agent rolled his eyes. “The man was insane.”

“No more insane than the shoe or underwear bombers,” he exclaimed

cheerfully. Gingerly placing the packet in a container nearby and shutting the lid, he added with a

sigh. “... Now we can call the bomb squad!”

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When the packet was retrieved by the bomb squad and he was finished with the autopsy, the coroner sewed up Omar Hammid, pulled the sheet over his head, and exited the room. On each side of him were several people: members of the media and CSI staff. When he reached the podium set up for him, he cleared his throat nervously and explained to the television audience the obvious facts (he died of multiple gunshot wounds to his head and torso), and then added briefly that the man had been a human bomb. The gory details were left out. All that the American people and the world needed to know was that it had been just enough explosives to kill someone close enough to feel the impact. The truth was, of course, as the bomb squad discovered, it would have killed everyone in the chambers. No effort was made to explain how the triggering device worked. Enough people were privy to this information. The president and Director of Homeland Security didn’t want to give out any more lone wolves ideas. In many homes, lunch rooms, or streaming laptops, the latest news about the shooting on Capitol Hill was aired throughout the day and night, the next day, the day after that, until, like all other top stories, it faded in importance and became old news—just another terrorist attempt by a mad bomber. Placed in the custody of his only relative, Uncle Rashad, who first introduced him to Jihad philosophy and gave him his Islamic name, Omar was discreetly buried in a municipal cemetery in nearby Maryland. On his headstone was carved his God-given name: Stuart

Whittlesby, which was, in fact, the only name on record for him. CSI was able to identify him after his apartment was searched and they found his original driver's license that showed a man with light brown hair, blue eyes, and a smiling face. There was no evidence, except on his forged passport, of a person named Omar. When visitors to the cemetery glanced at his headstone they would see his legal name, the dates for his birth and death, but no epitaph carved beneath. What could one say for this lost soul? There would be no flowers by his graveside. It seemed as though no one, even Uncle Rashad, who saw him as a great disappointment, cared enough to pay him a visit. He was now a name on a long list of failed terrorists, with a brief footnote in history books that set him apart from the others. Unlike other bombers, Stuart Whittlesby (A.K.A Omar Hammid) hadn't been carrying a bomb. Explosives had been strapped to his chest and he had driven a suicide vehicle to the scene.... He *was* the bomb and that made him unique. The new type of explosive was detonated in special container, and the original detonator was locked away to make sure no one attempted to build such a device.

Except for an infrequent reference to his failed attempt, Stuart was, in fact, a minor footnote in terrorist history, all but forgotten as the years passed, and yet to many like-minded Jihadists a hero—another warrior for the cause. While being a legend among lone wolf Jihadists, his ability to almost pull it off unnerved the Homeland Security Director and still worried congressmen on Capitol Hill. Despite the implications of what happened and the possibility a similar feat might be attempted again, his actions had been too bizarre to take seriously by most folks. There was still an ongoing war on terror. An army of Muslims were still on the march. A touch of humor said it best. Scrawled crudely next to his legal name, by an unknown visitor, was a title that summed up both his detractors and fellow Jihadists sentiments: “Omar—the human bomb!”