***All We See or Seem…***

***By***

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 \*= Published in a regional or collegiate literary journal

 “Who am I?”

 “Do you mean that rhetorically, or do you question your own identity?”

 “That is the question, is it not?”

 “We won’t get very far if you simply speak in circles. The whole purpose of this is to get a grip on what you believe is wrong here. Otherwise you could try to solve it yourself… I don’t think that will work… Do you?”

 “I suppose not… But you have to know why I’m not sure about discussing this.”

 “Why?”

 “Because I can’t be sure if you’re even real.”

 “Maybe you should take this from the top.”

 *The dream started in a recovery room. I say started, but I have every thought, every memory from the day of my birth to the very day I lay stretched out on a bed among three other strangers, all suffering some sort of malady to bring them there just as I. The fever I suffered mounted hours of a clammy sweat upon the frequency of shattering chills. A pain in one leg told me the infection started there, leaving blotches of red in the places I could see, and pain from new incisions and inflamed tissue. My throat burned as if stricken with another infection, the aftermath of anesthesia. When I could finally find peace in the pain and swelling, and succumbed to the numbing effect of the morphine being pumped into my veins, just as I slipped into sleep I felt a plastic hose being wrapped around my head and shoved in my face.*

 *“What’s this?” I begged of the perpetrator.*

 *“Your oxygen level was dropping when you went to sleep. You need that for a bit.”*

 *So now I’m no better than some old lady sucking butts for fifty years and carrying a tank in her shopping cart, removing it only long enough to enjoy another smoke. Who can sleep with this contraption adorning his countenance? Would it burn like the anesthetic did? It shouldn’t, they replied… But she didn’t wait around to see if the answer was correct.*

 *I’d been in recovery before. I’d had a couple surgeries before. Why did this time seem so different? Had I really had those surgeries before or was I just remembering a dream. Because this didn’t just seem different. It was different. The passing of time became obvious. Other patients came and went, but I was still there hours later. Men would be wheeled in, nurses would tend to their every need, always offering the empathetic, “How are you doing, Mr. Johnson?” Did they answer? I couldn’t tell. Minutes later off they would go with a barrage of attendants escorting them to a room with a view.*

 *That’s it, I thought. There is no view. No window to the outside world suggesting there is life out there. The lights only shone brightly at the exits and by the desk where only occasionally sat a nurse. Everywhere else darkness ruled. I could barely see my feet even dilated as my eyes must have been. After hours in this dark transitioning station I no longer felt the heat of my fever… just the cold…*

 *“Nurse?” I called, not even sure that’s what she was.*

 *She appeared out of the shadows and stood at my side. “What is it?”*

 *“I’m cold.”*

 *“Would you like another blanket?”*

 *“Why am I cold?... Am I in the morgue?”*

 *She laughed as she reached under the bed and pulled out another blanket, not much larger than a beach towel. “No, you’re not in the morgue. We’re on the third floor.”*

 *The third floor? Why aren’t there any windows? Seeing the sun might actually speed up the recovery process… Was she lying?*

 *And then I wondered… Do they know what they’re doing?*

**Operators**

Copyright 1985

 “Doctors – coming through!”

 Four fully garbed surgeons entered the operating theatre, trailed by assisting nurses and interns who carried the necessary tools for an extensive operation. The anesthetist brought up the rear with the anesthetics that looked more like tanks for an acetylene torch.

 At the center of the operating room sat a gurney where the sleeping body of the patient lay, breathing steady but slow, suggesting a more restful sleep rather than one of drug-induced unconsciousness.

 Doc One cleared his throat. “A’hem! Did anyone happen to bring a chart for this patient?”

 The head nurse fumbled around under a cart. “I think I’ve got it.”

 “Get it together, Nurse!” Doc Two commanded. “This is a hospital and you are part of a professional staff. We don’t have room for incompetence.” He rapped his knuckles on a table and quietly said, “Knock wood.”

 “Nevermind the chart, Nurse,” Doc One intervened. “I can do this appendectomy blindfolded.”

 “I hope not,” the anesthetist replied. “The patient is supposed to have a vasectomy.”

 “Him? I thought it was a woman.” He read the tag around the patient’s wrist. “Alexis Freeland.”

 One of the nurses grabbed Doc One’s glasses out of his shirt pocket and placed them on his face. “Is that any better, Doctor?”

 “Sorry. A’hem! That’s Alec S. Fruehling.”

 “What’s he in f-for?” Doc Three asked.

 “Gasbag here says a vasectomy,” Doc Four replied as he pointed to the anesthetist.

 “Good!” Doc Two said. “Then let’s get to it. With the four of us it should only take a few minutes – knock wood.”

 Each man moved in closer as if to uncover a buried treasure, but they all paused and gave each other a bewildered stare. Finally, Doc One asked of the other three, “Why are all four of us doing a vasectomy?”

 “Good point, Cap’n.” Doc Four added, “I usually do them in my office, behind a partition.”

 The anesthetist, after examining the patient’s face, modified his earlier remark, “On second thought, this doesn’t look like the same man I prepped.” He leaned back and looked at the doctors around him. “In fact, you guys don’t look like the same doctors I was supposed to assist. Are one of you Dr. Feldshauer?”

 “Feldshauer?” Doc One said. “He’s at St. John’s. We’re in Memorial – aren’t we?”

 The high level of professionalism overwhelming her, the head nurse sat back on the cart. “Oh, shit.”

 “I’ve got an idea,” Doc Three said. “Let’s b-bring him out of it and ask him what he’s in f-for.”

 “Brilliant idea, Einstein!” Doc Four responded.

 “Why didn’t I think of that?” Doc Two asked.

 “Mr. Freeland. Mr. Freeland,” Doc One said as he gently slapped the patient’s face.

 “That’s Fruehling,” the anesthetist reminded the doctor.

 “Oh, yes. A’hem! Mr. Fruehling, can you hear me?”

 “Huh? What?” the patient muttered as he began to come to consciousness. “St. Peter?”

 The nurse chuckled. “Now, that’s confidence.”

 “No, Mr. Freeland –”

 “Fruehling,” the anesthetist corrected - again.

 “Mr. Fruehling. We are the, uh, surgeons getting ready to perform your operation.”

 “Getting ready?” Alec asked, his voice still weak from sedation. “You mean – You mean, you’re not finished yet?”

 “Uh, no. And it’s a little embarrassing. You see, none of us know what you are here for.”

 Doc Two nudged Doc One. “You know, you should never end a sentence with a preposition.”

 “Sorry. Thanks for telling me.”

 “That’s okay. That’s what I’m here for.”

 All in the room became aware of the ticking clock while waiting for Alec to comprehend the question put to him. Finally, he said, “Would you repeat that, please.”

 Doc Two answered, “You should never end a sentence with a –”

 “No, no. Before that.”

 “What are –” Doc One stopped and reconfigured the words in his head. “For what reason have you been brought to this hospital to be operated – on?”

 Doc Four also asked, “Yeah, what is it, Sport? A vasectomy or an appendectomy?”

 Again Alex could not formulate his words easily. “You guys – You guys are – kidding, right?” Systematically he gazed at the surgeons, giving each one careful study. “Where the hell is Feldshauer?”

 *I closed my eyes as I pondered what might really be happening to me. I couldn’t remember what brought me there. I couldn’t remember why the pain in my leg was more intense than before. I started asking myself questions. Where was I born? What do I do for a living? What’s my favorite color? What’s the capital of… of… I couldn’t even think of a state.*

 *After a few minutes of torturing myself with questions, I drifted. The morphine did its work to soften the pain. The oxygen felt cool in my nostrils, even if it did smell a little off. My brain slowly started shutting down…*

 *When I opened my eyes I couldn’t grasp where I was at all. This wasn’t the recovery room. This wasn’t even in a hospital. There was movement. It was dark, but I could see shapes. I laid on a short couch with my legs draped off the side because it wasn’t long enough. But it wasn’t a couch… more like a car seat. In front a man and a woman faced forward, gazing into the dark path before them. I rose and looked out the window. I recognized the highway as being one that bypasses the town in which I live. Dark as it was, I knew the trees along that road. At least I thought I knew.*

 *“Where are we?” I asked.*

 *My question didn’t even merit a turn of either head.*

 *“Hey! What are we doing?”*

 *Finally the driver tilted his head back and spoke. “You’ve been asleep a while. We’re almost there.”*

 *“Almost where?”*

 *“Don’t worry. It’s a safe house.”*

 *“Who are you?”*

 *“Wow,” the woman said as she leaned toward the dash and turned on the radio. “You really were asleep.”*

 *Expecting something melodic to come from the speakers, I was shocked when a voice was the subject of their listening pleasure… someone going on and on about the current administration and how the world was going to hell in a hand basket because whoever he wanted as leader had been defeated in the last election.*

 *“He’s still on?” she said to the driver.*

 *“I like him. He tells it like it is.”*

 *“He’s an idiot.”*

 *I recognized the voice on the radio, but I couldn’t put a name with him. That really shouldn’t have even made me twitch. My chauffeur and his escort had no place in my collective memory. So not remembering the name of some blowhard on the radio shouldn’t have bothered me at all. But it all had meaning for some reason.*

**Young Ambition’s Ladder**

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**SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA - AUGUST 10, 2188**

 "You can't be serious!" Henry MacMillan leaned back in his chair and looked at his son. The sleeves of his dress jacket were pulled to the fullest part of his forearm and strained a bit when he ran his hand across the skin on top of his head. "How long have you been letting this brew in your brain?"

 "I've always been concerned about it,” Daniel replied. “I just think we need to consider all the ramifications of this new treaty. President O'Hallaran and you were friends, for God's sake."

 "Preston and I go way back, that's for sure. But I would never go so far as to think him the new savior of the free world."

 "And I'm not suggesting he is, either." Daniel walked around the desk and turned his father's chair toward himself. "Dad, are you even fathoming how many nations in the world right now have joined with the UAN?"

 "USA, UAN – they think that makes a difference. But nothing has changed since I and the other four governors told the old USA to go screw themselves and let us run our own states. Everybody in the so-called free world thought we were crazy. They all said, 'Jesus, the Union will never stand for that. They'll bomb the shit out of you.' Tell me, boy. Are you smart enough to know why they didn't?"

 "Because they were trying to win a war."

 "Bullshit! Because they were trying to force the whole of Africa and the Middle East to conform to the ideals of the West. The Mid East and Northern Africa were in danger of losing their freedom, so the US went in to stop it and South Africa almost kicked the shit out of them. Do you realize how close the Union came to losing that war? So money they promised to us to help our ongoing energy needs went to buying technology and weapons. Congress didn't like the fact that we seceded. But it couldn't do a damn thing about it."

 "You make it sound like the whole war was a farce."

 "You haven't learned a goddamn thing in school, have you? Why the hell do you think the entire West Coast wouldn't support it?"

 "Honestly?"

 "Of course, honestly! I didn't raise you to lie."

 Daniel backed up and straightened his hair that had become frazzled during a more animated moment. "Because you told them it was wrong, and they believed you."

 Henry grunted and then turned his chair away from Daniel.

 "Dad, it's true. From the very first day you told the people of California you were running for Governor, they fell in love with you. They hung on your every word, they cheered when you told them to, and they cried when you cried."

 "Only because they knew when an injustice was being done to them."

 "No, Dad. Because people want to be told what to do. Because when things looked bleak, like they did during the height of the war, the people wanted some higher power to come in and make the world a safe and better place to live, and they saw that in you."

 The Governor rose from his seat and walked over to a group of chairs where his other son, Alexander, sat quietly and read from a book. "Tell me what's wrong with that."

 "Nothing. Back then you were right. You gave the world a wake-up call. You showed the rest of the United States that the government could not turn its back on the needs of the people. You made the supreme sacrifice a man in your position could possibly make by seceding from the Union. Otherwise, when the war was nearly lost, you could have been the President of the United States by a record majority."

 Alexander stopped reading and looked at his brother with a puzzled expression. "Why would he have wanted that?"

 "He could have been the man that stopped the war and united the world."

 Alexander laughed. "You call this world united? Just because the war is over and now they want to call their country the United American Nations, don't think for one minute that the fighting has stopped."

 "That is exactly why we should do the noble thing and join with the UAN to help bring the remaining nations together in a lasting peace."

 Henry took the book out of Alexander's hands and looked at it, then gave it back to him. "Lasting peace. Now where have we heard that before? The Caesars, Napoleon, Hitler, Lui. They all said the same thing. The only truth about lasting peace is that there is never lasting peace."

 "So, we should give up?"

 "No, goddamn it! You call what we're doing here giving up? We are fighting for peace – peace and prosperity. But it’s not something we can do once and then say, 'Well, we gave it our best shot. Gee, I hope it lasts.' We can't let our guard down for one minute. That is the only way that we'll maintain lasting peace. Not attain, but maintain."

 An unseen voice cut into the conversation, "Governor MacMillan?"

 "Yes, Janice," Henry answered.

 "Mrs. MacMillan is here to see you."

 Alexander closed the book he read and set it on the table next to him. In a subtle move he tugged on his jacket to straighten it and then pressed one hand across the collar of his black dress tee.

 "By all means, Janice,” the Governor said. “Never keep my wife waiting."

 "Yes, sir."

 Henry broke away from the conversation completely and paced toward the office door where Karina MacMillan soon entered. Without wasting a moment, he took her in his arms and kissed her on the lips, gently but solidly. "God, you look great today!"

 Karina smiled and flipped her long, auburn hair over her shoulder and gave Henry another hug. "I hope you're not planning on working too late tonight."

 "I hadn't planned on it." Then Henry glanced over to Daniel. "But I hadn't counted on dissention within my own staff."

 Karina walked toward Henry's desk, removing her jacket as she walked. When she past Alexander, he stood and took a step in her direction. "Can I take your jacket for you, Karina?"

 "Sure, Alexander." She tossed the jacket to him and then kept moving. "Thanks."

 Alexander straightened the jacket, and then for just a moment he let his hand stray up and down the fabric. He carried the jacket the same way someone would carry a small pet, not taking his eyes off it while he walked to the coat stand.

 "So who's causing all the trouble?" Karina asked as she sat in Henry's chair. "Certainly not Alexander!"

 "No," Henry replied. "Alexander is the perfect Security Chief. I tell him what to do and then he shuts up and does it."

 Karina smiled. "Really now. Then Daniel must be the bad boy."

 Daniel bowed his head and faced the window. "Just a healthy difference of opinion."

 "Well, I'd love to debate this all morning with you,” Henry said, “but I have a country to run. The other Governors and I are going to meet tomorrow in L.A. and I've got to get ready for it."

 "Dad, will you at least consider what I've said?"

 "I'm quite sure it will come up again." Henry stood behind his own chair, which now held his young wife busy at the keyboard of his computer. "My God, you smell like peaches and cream. I'm not going to get much work done if you're going to write at my desk."

 "Oh, please, Henry! I have to get this book finished by Friday."

 "Mmm," he took a whiff of her hair. "What's this one about?"

 "You wouldn't be interested."

 "You know, most writers stopped using the keyboard ages ago."

 “I know, I know. I could say what I wanted to say into my espee and it would compile it into a grammatically perfect text.” Not missing a stroke at the keys, Karina leered back at her husband. "A true writer writes from the brain; a speaker talks from the gut. I prefer the old fashioned way."

 "Alexander has been reading one of your books."

 Karina perked up and gazed at Alexander. "Really? Which one?"

 Hands in pockets, Alexander strolled to the center of the office. "*Internalized Fear and Externalized Violence*."

 "What do you think?"

 "I haven't finished it yet, but so far it's very compelling. I'm not sure I understand why you think repressed memories are so integral to psychological trauma."

 "They're only integral when they exist. But they are not the cause of psychological trauma as much as a byproduct of, so-to-speak. You really did read the book."

 "Like I said, I haven't finished it yet. Do you address elements of dysfunction in the last half of the book?"

 "Of course. It goes hand-in-hand with trauma. But if you're talking about dysfunction caused by chemical imbalance, you won't find that in there. I leave that to medical doctors to debate."

 "Fascinating."

 Daniel took a deep breath and headed for the door.

 "Daniel," Henry said. "We'll talk about this further after the conference."

 "You know where I'll be."

 Alexander entered his father's apartment carrying two brief cases. He set them on the floor next to Henry's computer terminal and then moved toward a recliner nearby. "Butler?"

 A voice answered Alexander, "How can I serve you?"

 "I need a drink."

 "Specify."

 "Rum and cola, four to one, moderate ice."

 "Volume?"

 "Five-hundred milliliters."

 "One moment, please."

 A few seconds later, a dome on the table next to the chair opened and revealed a glass filled with dark liquid. Alexander picked up the glass and sipped it slowly. "Mmmm. Excellent! You've been trained well."

 "Thank you. If I may be of further service, please ask."

 After taking a couple long sips of the drink, Alexander meandered through the apartment. The shelves and shelves of hardbound books intrigued him most. His eyes followed the titles along each row, traveling up and down the different levels and orientations on which the titles laid. Finally, his eyes came to rest on the title he sought – not so much the title but the author. The book bore the author's name, Karina Laughlin-MacMillan, Ph.D. The title of the book made it sound more technical than the book he read in his father's office: *Psychology vs. Physiology in Biogenetic Human Specimens*.

 Alexander flipped through a couple pages of the book and then stopped. In a few short seconds his eyes shifted from one side to the other without his head twitching a millimeter. Thirty seconds to a page, he moved through the foreword and the first chapter in a little less than fifteen minutes. Just as he got a good start on the next chapter, the door slid open, and Karina and Henry entered.

 Henry noticed his son right away. "Alexander, you're here."

 "I needed a drink," Alexander replied. "Do you want one?"

 "No. Karina and I have party where we need to make an appearance. You're welcome to join us if you don't have any plans."

 "I don't think so."

 "Did you bring the things I need for tomorrow?"

 "Two cases by your computer."

 "Thanks." Henry looked at Karina. "I'm going to change my shirt and lose the jacket." He kissed her quickly. "I'll be right back."

 Karina noticed the book Alexander held in his hands and smiled. "Seems like you can't get enough of my work."

 Alexander nodded. "Curiosity."

 "Why don't you read the disk books or have them virtua-loaded like everyone else. Hard bound books are old-fashioned."

 "Touché. But the people who designed the technology you just mentioned all got their learning from hardbound books. I figure that should tell us something."

 "That one's a lot different than the one you had in the office."

 "So I noticed. Biogenetic human specimens - you've actually had occasion to study one?"

 "Yes, I have. It's a brave new world working with that science."

 "Biogenetics is nothing new. They've been toying around with that since the Twentieth Century." Alexander set the book back in its spot on the shelf. "Actually, selective breeding was the forerunner of biogenetics."

 "That's true. But they haven't really perfected it until now."

 Alexander laughed. "Do you think they really are perfected?"

 "The scientific applications are."

 "I don't know. The examples that we have are no more emotionally stable than the *old fashioned* sperm and egg people."

 "They're still sperm and egg. They're just controlled." Karina approached Alexander and stood face to face with him. "You like that, don't you."

 "What's that?"

 "Control. You seem to like a very controlled environment."

 "There's a lot to be said about losing control, though."

 Karina took her hand and lightly caressed Alexander's face. "I'll bet you've never lost control a day in your life."

 "You'd be surprised."

 The few seconds she kept her hand on his face seemed an eternity, but then Karina pulled her hand down and walked away from him. "Why aren't you out socializing with a young woman?"

 "It's Monday night."

 "Your father and I find the time."

 "Father has already proved himself. I have yet to make my mark on the world, so I have to work harder."

 "I'm surprised that some young lady has yet to set her sights on you. Or maybe she has and you just don't know it yet."

 "What makes you say that?"

 Karina approached him again. "You're smart, good looking." She stroked his upper arm. "Strong. Plenty of women would consider you a fine catch."

 "Opportunity hasn't presented itself, yet."

 "It will."

 Henry came out of the bedroom, brushing off his pants, and saying, "The only thing I don't like about this apartment is we can't have our cleaning service in here. The damn dust collects in here faster than it does in our desert house."

 "But we're only two floors up from your work," Karina said as she moved away from Alexander and toward Henry. "And it's the only way that you and I can be together so much." She kissed Henry on the cheek. "I'll be right out."

 "Where are you going?"

 "Nature calls, my love."

 Alexander, with drink in one hand and the other in his pocket, gazed out the window facing the city, scanning the architecture the same way he had earlier scanned the bookshelf. "I think next week I'll go back to L.A. for a while."

 "Oh? What's going on in L.A. next week?"

 "Nothing. But there's nothing happening here, either. Eldon Hiller and I are going to meet with some prospective police officers. We've had to hire replacements for L.A. and San Francisco. Besides, I like the ocean."

 "I wish you wouldn't spend so much time with Hiller. He's a prick."

 "Then why did you hire him?"

 "Because he knows law enforcement."

 "That he does. Anyway, he's the kind of prick who makes me laugh. I like his nostalgic attire. He reminds me of Basil Rathbone or Steve Buschemi, or one of those early film actors."

 Henry stood beside Alexander and put a hand on his son's back. "Alexander, I know we haven't talked a lot about some of these things before. Daniel has always been the one who delved into things political with me. You were always the one I relied on to keep us safe and secure, and kept everyone's noses clean."

 "He's always been more opinionated than me, if that's what you mean."

 "Not only that, but I need to know something."

 "What?"

 "I need to know where you stand on this rejoining the Union. Are you with Daniel, or do you stand with me?"

 "Honestly?"

 "Always."

 Alexander finished the last of his drink and set the glass on the coffee table behind them. "Actually, I don't stand with either one of you."

 "How so?"

 "You ask me who I stand with, and I'd have to say that I stand with the people. They sought peace, prosperity, and something as simple as knowing they would eat everyday. They sought an end to aggression, and end to bureaucratic mishandling, and a leader who would make decisions based on the well-being of the people, not the well-being of the government structure. The fact that you and the other four governors were allowed to do what you did proved that the Union, whatever it calls itself, only cared about the war, not the people for whom they were allegedly fighting. You built this nation and gave it a firm foundation. Now you ask me who I stand with. Well, I stand with the people; and since you stand with them, too, that means you and I are in agreement, and Daniel opposes us. But if you changed your mind, I would still stand with the people."

 Henry stared at his son for a moment and gradually smiled. "Lowliness is young ambition’s ladder. I think I have grossly underestimated you."

 "You asked."

 "Alexander, I want you to come with me to L.A. tomorrow. Until recently I had always assumed that I would groom Daniel as my successor. But I think things have changed."

 Daniel stepped off the elevator, marched past the reception desk, and snapped to the holographic secretary behind the desk, "Janice, I'm going in."

 "Does the Governor know you're coming?"

 "I repeat," farther down the hall, "I'm going in."

 Moving so fast down the hall, Daniel could tell that Janice kept talking, but he couldn't understand it, nor did he care. He breathed quickly, kept his legs pumping, and swore whenever he could catch his breath.

 As soon as Daniel hit the door with the force of his momentum, Henry jumped to his feet and held up his hand like an old-style traffic cop. "Hold on, goddamn it! Just what the hell is your problem?"

 "Don't you goddamn me! Don't you dare goddamn me! I want some answers, and I want them now!"

 "Whatever your problem is, I'm not even going to begin talking to you until you calm down."

 "Why did you have Onyah Jazell arrested?"

 "Governor Jazell's wife?"

 "Don't play dumb with me! The Governor spent a half-hour on the phone with me. He said that he told you in confidence his wife was leaving him and moving to Texas. She disappeared three days ago, and then last night he got a call from the Vancouver Penitentiary she was there under your orders."

 "I don't know a goddamn thing about it! He told me about Onyah wanting to leave, but I didn't let anyone know about it. The only other person who knew was Alexander."

 "And he's in L.A., isn't he?"

 A voice boomed from the side office, "Not anymore."

 Daniel jerked his head toward the location of the voice. "Alexander?"

 "Yes," he replied as he entered the main office. "I just got back this morning."

 "Did you have Onyah Jazell arrested?"

 "Yes. Some of Hiller's men picked her up at the Seattle Air Hub before she boarded a commercial flight to Dallas."

 Henry joined his son's shock. "Why the fuck did you do that?"

 Alexander winced at his father’s words but continued, "As soon as the Governor gave you that info, I started an immediate investigation. We put a couple men on her and it led us to a few other arrests."

 "Where are you going with this?"

 "Father, she was taking a huge bundle of hardcopy information with her. Military numbers, financial records, and a list of some of our operatives in New York and London."

 Henry scowled. "What operatives?"

 "We have deep cover ops agents all over the globe."

 "Are you fucking out of your mind?"

 Daniel joined with his father. "Since when did we agree to do this?"

 Alexander remained calm. "Do you realize how many people on this planet want to see us fail? We have to protect ourselves, and the only way we can do it is obtain intelligence data. And the best way to do that is with deep cover operatives."

 "All right," Henry replied as he held out his hands and waved them downward, as if to quell the emotions in the room. "I will grant you that is probably not a bad idea. But to arrest Onyah Jazell is something about which I should have been informed."

 "And what would you have said? Let her go? Cut her a break? Dad, she was committing blatant acts of treason! The fact that she's the wife of a Governor is even more compelling to have her stopped."

 Daniel still doubted the validity of Alexander's arguments. "So where is she now?"

 "That depends on your religious convictions."

 Without taking his eyes off Alexander, Henry stepped behind his desk and fell into his chair. "What are you saying, boy?"

 "We carried out a sentence of execution at 12:01 this morning."

 Daniel yelled, "Without a trial!"

 "Oh, we had a trial."

 Henry began randomly scanning the room, not exactly looking at anything in particular. "How can you have a trial without a judge and court officers?"

 "Dathan McNeil served as her court-appointed defender, Eldon Hiller presented the State's case, and Michael Redfeather from Vancouver heard the case. You appointed him to the Supreme Court there when we formed Costa California."

 As Henry bowed his head and shook it back and forth, Daniel stepped up beside his father and looked directly at Alexander. "See, Dad. This is exactly why we have to stop this madness."

 "Daniel," Henry said quietly.

 "It's one thing for us to fight for our people against the tyranny of a huge bureaucracy, but it's another thing entirely when we ourselves become the tyrants."

 "Daniel, I know."

 "Redfeather and McNeil would have never agreed to this if we had been a part of the Union."

 "Agreed to it?" Alexander said. "I hate to burst your over-inflated sense of decency, but Hiller asked for a sentence of death, McNeil agreed to the conditions, and Redfeather picked the time. I believe his words were, 'If we allow this sort of behavior to go unchecked, we will only encourage more dissention among the people.'"

 "My God! Father, if you don't do something about this right now then you are admitting you’re a party to it."

 "You're right." Henry hit a pad on his desk. "Janice?"

 Alexander pulled a black square out of his coat pocket, aimed it at the desk, and squeezed.

 "Janice? Janice?" Henry pounded on his desk again and again. "What did you just do?"

 "I shut down your system. I don't want you to do anything rash until we discuss this."

 "We've discussed it enough! What you've done is nothing less than murder!"

 "What I did was preserve the heart of freedom that was born within the framework of the nation you built! Onyah Jazell threatened that framework. If I'd have thought that the Governor was part of it, he would have been vaporized, too. Redfeather, McNeil, and Hiller aren't the only ones who believe that. I've talked to the Governors of Washington, Oregon, and Baja, all since the execution. They are all with me."

 "Well, I'm not!"

 Daniel moved toward the door. "Neither am I."

 Alexander turned to Daniel. "Where do you think you're going?"

 "I am getting the fuck out of here and going to New York as soon as I can get a car, you fucking bastard!"

 Alexander's voice shook the room as he spoke, "Don't you ever say fuck to me!"

 "Why? Are you going to have me shot if I do it again, you fucking pig?"

 From under his coat, Alexander withdrew a pistol and fired one shot that struck Daniel in the throat. Daniel dropped to his knees, looked at Alexander and tried to say, "You fu - fu - fu -" He fell backward to the floor.

 Henry all but leaped over his desk and ran to his son, cradling his bloody head in his lap. "Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Alexander, what have you done? What have you done?"

 "What you should have done the first time he told you to rejoin the Union. If he hadn't started all that talk months ago, this whole thing would have never happened."

 "But he's your brother!"

 "He *was* my brother."

 Henry hugged his murdered son. "This is my fault. This is all my fault."

 "It wasn't your fault. How could you know this would happen?"

 After a few more moments of tending to his dead son, Henry then carefully laid Daniel on the floor, and stood to face Alexander. "I have something to tell you. Something you're not going to like. And if you're going to shoot me, then shoot me. But I'm going to say this first."

 "If you think you can stop this by rejoining the Union, it won't work. The other Governors, including Jazell, will back me. They are all ready to throw their support behind whoever will best serve the interests of the people."

 "No. That's not what I was going to tell you." Henry approached Alexander and came within inches of his face. "Daniel was my son – my true son."

 "What's that supposed to mean?"

 "He was the actual product of the love I had for his mother, Lucinda. Haven't you ever wondered exactly when your so-called mother died?"

 "You told me it was shortly after I was born."

 "No. You always assumed it. But it was before."

 Alexander laughed and pulled back a bit. "How can that be?"

 "She found out she had Taskerasmosis when Daniel was a year old. And since that's genetic, she was afraid that Daniel might also have it. So we found a doctor who could test him for it. He said there was no sign of it of the disease, but he did carry the gene. And then he recommended something fantastic."

 Alexander drew his face into a doubting squint.

 "He said he could take an egg from your mother and sperm from me and manipulate the DNA in each to create someone who would be the most perfect reflection of Lucinda and me, replacing any defected genes with pure genetic material. That way, if Daniel did show signs of the disease, I would have another son who was free of all genetic disorders. I hated the idea. But she wanted it. She wanted someone to carry on the legacy."

 "Are you saying I am a biogenetic creation?"

 "Yes. But that's not what I know you're going to be pissed about."

 "What then?"

 "Four days after the test embryos began to grow, Lucinda died. And I remained without a wife for fifteen years. And then I met a young psychologist who had a unique interest in the psychological profile of a biogenetic specimen."

 Alexander took a deep breath. "Karina."

 Henry seemed to grow a few millimeters. "I know that you want to fuck her. You've wanted to fuck her from the first day you met her. So did I. The only difference is that I got to. And you just got to dream about it. I’m the man she fucks now. And you’re just a goddamn scientific experiment to her.”

 First he trembled as he dropped his gun, and then Alexander’s eyes bulged from their sockets. Finally, Alexander’s mouth opened and he screamed, “No!” He grabbed Henry by the throat and squeezed. Alexander’s thumbs lay directly on his father’s windpipe as he pressed against Henry’s throat as hard as he could.

 Henry could only get out one word. “Alexander.” Then the bones in Henry’s neck popped and his eyes rolled backward into his skull.

 Letting him fall to the floor, Alexander stood over the body of his father, exhaling and inhaling at an accelerated rate. As his breathing slowed he stepped away from Henry, straightened his jacket, and brushed his sleeves. Then Alexander squatted next to his father and smiled. “I’m sorry, father. But you know how much I hate that word.”

 Alexander picked up the remote from the floor and keyed in a few numbers, and then he pointed it at his father’s desk. After a deep breath, in a frantic tone, Alexander yelled. “Security! I need security in here now!”

 Eldon Hiller stood next to Alexander while two security guards enclosed the bodies of Daniel and Henry in plastic cartons. "You had no warning Daniel was going to do this?"

 "None," Alexander replied, sullen and seemingly catatonic. "I, uh, stepped into the side office while Dad and he argued. Then all of sudden it got quiet until I heard Dad gasp for air. I tried to stop him, but it was too late."

 Hiller looked at his espee. "The room recorder was shut off after your father yelled for his HS. What happened?"

 "That wasn't Dad. That was me. Then Daniel used the remote to shut off the computer."

 "The voice print identified it as Henry."

 "Run a cross check again. I think if you check the data file you'll find that Dad's voice print and mine are so close that the computer has trouble identifying them on occasion."

 "So then you came into the room and found your father on the floor with Daniel standing over him. Is that when Daniel pulled the gun on you?"

 "No, the gun was mine. I couldn't believe what I saw, but I pulled my gun and held it on him. He walked over to me saying he didn't know why he did it. But at the same time he said Dad had to be stopped. As soon as he was within reach of me, he grabbed the gun and tried to take it away from me. I don't know, I guess I just snapped. I was able to get him down on the floor, and then I shot him in the throat. I guess I just snapped."

 One of the guards interrupted. "Mr. Hiller, I have the analysis of the crime scene."

 "In a nutshell, Corporal."

 "It all checks out just like Alexander said. Daniel's prints are on the remote. The Governor's neck is broken. And Daniel suffered two point blank shots to the throat."

 "Good work."

 "The only thing I couldn't figure is why Daniel's blood is on the Governor."

 Alexander turned to the guard and opened his coat. "I got Daniel's blood on me. When I shot him he fell into my arms. I must have gotten some on Dad after I called security. I sat on the floor for a while and held him while I waited for them. It seemed like it took them a long time to get up here."

 "God!" Hiller replied. "That must have been awful. They got held up when they tried to get through the door. Someone must have scrambled the codes to open it."

 Alexander dropped his head. “Must‘ve been Daniel. He thought of everything.”

 The guard nodded. "Sounds logical."

 Hiller slipped his espee back in his pocket. "To me, too. You two take the bodies to the roof for transportation. I need to talk to Mr. MacMillan for a few minutes."

 "Yes, sir."

 The cartons carrying the bodies of Henry and Daniel levitated about waist high, and the guards pushed them out of the office.

 As soon as the guards were gone, Hiller picked up the remote from the table and aimed it at the desk. "The computer is off now."

 "And?" Alexander asked, puzzled by Hiller's move.

 "Is that what really happened?"

 Alexander turned away from Hiller and walked to the window. "Eldon, if you ever ask me that question again I'll kill you."

 "Okay, okay. Take it easy. It's probably better this way. What now?"

 "As soon as I notify the other Governor's what's happened, I will officially announce that I am carrying on the work that my father began as the new Governor of California and the Republic of Costa California. I don't expect any trouble, but just in case I want you to dispatch militia to each of the Capitals."

 "Good idea. The presence of authority ought to keep everyone calm."

 "One more thing." Alexander sat in his father's chair and turned to Hiller. "Daniel was working with someone else."

 "Who?"

 "Karina. I can't be sure, but I think they were having an affair."

 "Really? I'll pick her up immediately. Do you want to question her?"

 "No need. I'm sure that she'd deny it to me as well as to you."

 "Where do you want me to take her?"

 "Vancouver. We're going to need McNeil and Redfeather again."

 *“There’s the house,” the driver said as he spun the wheel to the right and guided the car into a small gravel lane.*

 *“The pole light is out,” the woman said.*

 *“I told Marvin to shut it down when he checked out the place yesterday. I don’t want to draw attention to it.”*

 *“Where are we?” I asked, still trying to get a better answer than I had been getting.*

 *“The safe house,” the woman answered. “Are you playing stupid or are you really this out of it after your sleep?”*

 *“I don’t know where I am… or for that matter, who you are?”*

 *“I’m actually not surprised,” the man said as the car came to a stop and he shifted into park. “I’ve read your profile. You have a history of losing touch with reality. Did you do a lot of drugs as a young man?”*

 *Had I? I couldn’t remember. I sort of remembered smoking a little pot and maybe snorting some coke a few times. But not to the point of being so out of it I didn’t remember where I was. “I was in a hospital.”*

 *“When?” the man asked.*

 *“Just now. I was in a hospital, and I fell asleep in recovery and woke up here.”*

 *“You were dreaming.”*

 *“But it was so vivid. And I remember things from before.” I knew he couldn’t be serious. This had to be the dream. The landscape sat in darkness and obscurity, and the house – the “safe” house – looked more the product of nightmares… But it was real… or at least seemed to be.*

**Emotional Ultrastability:**

**People Who Knead People**

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“I spoke to a divorce lawyer today."

 Marsha only looked at John for a second and then refocused on the beefsteak she pounded on the butcher block. "Really? Did you get the brakes looked at like you said you were going to?"

 "To do, dear. Never end a sentence in a preposition." John grabbed a stick of celery from a tray on the table and began to nibble. "And yes, I had the brakes checked. They're fine."

 "What did he say?"

 "He said I just needed a little brake fluid."

 "No, I mean the divorce lawyer. What did he say?"

 "He doesn't seem to understand. I don't think I made myself very clear."

 "Well, that's possible, John. You do sometimes make the most simplistic matters quite confusing. Could you hand me the marjoram?"

 John reached to a spice rack some three feet from where he stood and eighteen inches from Marsha's location. "I don't see any. Did you buy any the last time you were at the store?"

 "I didn't think I was out - I mean, out of it. Is it behind the basil?"

 "Well, I don't think I see the - Oh, wait. It is here. You've got half a shaker full."

 "What? Of the basil or the marjoram?"

 "The marjoram." John handed Marsha the shaker and then looked back at the rack. "But I don't think you have any basil. You must be out of it."

 "That's okay. I really don't use it that often."

 "Then why would you be out of it?"

 "I don't know what you mean, John."

 "If you rarely use it then there should be plenty."

 "Well, that would only be true if I never used it. I do use it occasionally so I will run out from time to time."

 "Touché. Anyway, what was I talking about?"

 "Uhp! Caught you. The preposition thing."

 "Sorry. That's a tough one. Uh, let's see.” He almost stuttered. “About what was I talking?"

 "The divorce lawyer."

 "Oh, yes. He said if we were to agree to a no fault resolution we could probably have a divorce in a matter of weeks. I asked him about property and all that, and he said that as long as whatever we arrange we both agree to it there won't be any problem."

 Marsha laid down the meat tenderizer and wiped her hands on the white towel setting beside the pile of beefsteak. "What didn't he understand?"

 "He asked me why we wanted to get divorced."

 "And what did you tell him?"

 "Because we no longer wanted to be married."

 "Well, I apologize, dear. That should have been very clear. I don't see how he could have been confused after you told him that."

 Having found a seat at the dining room table, John continued to munch on the celery, dropping it into the dip centered neatly on the tray before each bite. "I know. That's what I thought. But he said that wasn't a reason."

 "Well, it certainly sounds like one to me."

 "May I go on, honey?"

 "Of course, dear."

 "So he went on to ask me if I beat you."

 Marsha shook her head back and forth.

 "To which I replied, no. Then he asked if you beat me."

 This time Marsha tilted her head and rolled her eyes as she smiled.

 "To which I also replied, no. And then he asked if we fought."

 "But he just asked you that."

 John teetered a bit. "I said the same thing. But he said he was talking about verbal fighting. You know, where we argue about things and never seem to resolve anything. And I told him that I couldn't even remember the last time we disagreed on anything major - or minor for that matter."

 The rattle of pans almost drowned out Marsha's voice for a moment. "That should have shut him up - dear."

 "Good save. You'd think. But that only seemed to infuriate him all the more. So he asked me one more time why we wanted to get a divorce."

 With hands on both hips, one holding a broiling pan, Marsha kept her head tilted and looked at John. "You're kidding!"

 "Seriously. So I said very slowly, 'Because - we - don't - want - to be - married -

anymore.' Did you know that he drinks?"

 "The divorce lawyer drinks? I thought he had quit a long time ago."

 "So did I. But he pulled a full bottle of bourbon out of his drawer and poured a small glass for himself and drank it right there in front of me. He offered me a glass, but I said that it wasn't five-o'clock yet."

 "Good for you, John. So then what?"

 "After that we talked about the no fault stuff and the property settlement."

 Marsha carefully laid the steaks into the broiling pan and treated them with the marjoram. "Oh, that reminds me. You really should take the Oldsmobile. It gets much better gas mileage and you drive so much more than I do."

 "I know, but you like the color and I thought that you hated the Pontiac."

 "Oh, I don't hate it. I just have trouble getting in and out of it with a skirt. And besides, I can trade it next year when I get that settlement from my parents' estate."

 "As long as that's okay with you. I really like the Oldsmobile better."

 "In fact, while you were at the divorce lawyer's today I cleaned out the Oldsmobile and took out all my things. I even found a pair of panties that I didn't even know I'd lost - or had, for that matter. But I know they're mine."

 "Are you sure?"

 "They have to be. They're so tight on me there's no way they'd belong to you."

 "Well," John rose from the table and walked into the family room, "you know best." As he approached the bar in one corner he checked his watch and smiled. "Yes." With only marginal enthusiasm, John pulled out a bottle of Dewar's from under the bar and tossed a handful of ice into a small glass. "Can I fix you anything?"

 "No, dear. I'm afraid I was bad today at lunch."

 "Oh?"

 "Yes, I met with Kelly at Randall's and we spent the afternoon together. She was drinking wine so I joined her. I'm afraid my head was spinning a bit before we left the restaurant. I hope you don't mind."

 "Not at all, hon. How is Kelly? Is she still seeing Brian?"

 "No, unfortunately not. Brian just wasn't right for her."

 "You're kidding. He's such a ladies' man. I thought all the women liked Brian."

 "I don't know. She really didn't want to talk about it. But I thought that they were just so sexually compatible. Did you know she has a mirror on her bedroom ceiling?"

 "Yes, I did."

 "And she has the cutest little butt."

 "Yes, she does."

 "You know," Marsha tapped her upper lip with her index finger while she put her thoughts to words, "I'll bet those panties would fit her just right."

 "Whatever you say, dear."

 "I should probably wash them and give them to her when I see her Saturday night."

 "Oh?" John asked as he seated himself in the recliner. "Are we seeing her Saturday night?"

 "Just me, dear. She's rented some Bette Midler movie and we're going to watch it."

 "Well, that's okay. I've got to work late Friday night again. Then I have to go into the office Saturday morning to update some files that we've been working on this week. I thought I'd just stay at the office overnight. Did you find anything in the Oldsmobile that belongs to me?"

 "Just your golf glove."

 "That's okay. I'll stop at the drug store Friday." John took a gentle swig of his Scotch. "Ah, that's the ticket."

 "Dinner'll be ready in about a half hour. Shall we eat in the dining room?"

 "Whatever you say, dear."

 "Dr. Lynwood, I'm glad you could drop by to see me this morning."

 Cassiopeia Lynwood stood before the desk of her boss, wondering what it was that she had done to merit such a summons. "Your assistant said it was urgent, Axel. I took that to mean it was a bit more than a social call."

 "It is." Dr. Renfro struggled to swing his chair straight with his desk, having to scoot back a bit to make room for his enormous gut. "You may have a seat if you like."

 "No, thanks. I'll stand. I've got things to do this morning."

 "I see." The Doctor tilted his head back and kept his eyes fixed on Cassiopeia as though he was looking through spectacles, but there were none on his face. "Never pull any punches, do you, Cassie? Always tell it like it is, ay?"

 "Axel, it is you who wants us to get this project wrapped up ASAP. I've got people working around the clock fixing your little problems that probably wouldn't have happened if you had listened to Dr. Claypool and me last year."

 "Hindsight is always twenty-twenty, Doctor. You and Dr. Claypool didn't sound so sure of yourselves last year when you first presented your theories."

 "But we were the only ones to identify them."

 Axel clapped his hands. "Bravo! Bravo! In six months you managed to learn more about biogenetic engineering than an entire team of crack specialists," he began spitting as he spoke, "because you solved this enigma that we had identified back in the sixties!"

 "What do you want, Axel?"

 "Dr. Claypool has failed with her assignment, no fault of her own. She's only the third one to have taken this path. But, I dare say, she has shown the beginnings of success in another area. You are going to pick up where she left off with her previous failure, seeing as how you know all there is to know about this particular subject."

 "I never said that!"

 "So you're saying that you can't succeed where she failed?"

 "Come on! She and I have known each other since preschool. I don't presume to know more about the project then she does. So if you're putting me on this just to make me look bad then I don't want any part of it."

 "Don't get me wrong. I wouldn't put you on this if I thought you would fail. In fact, if you do fail on this one I will have come to the conclusion that this one is unwinnable. But I don't believe that, either. There is evidence that we're turning a corner. The right push could send us down the road of success."

 Dr. Lynwood exhaled a deep sigh. "Do you really think that we're ready for this?"

 "In the words of a great statesman, 'If not now, when?'"

 The drugstore looked dead. John had parked by the only car in the parking lot, an older Chevy bearing faded paint and caved in driver side door. His own Pontiac with its high gloss and untouched chrome made the other car seem all the worse. John only gave it a passing glance as he walked into the store.

 At the counter stood three people waiting to check out their purchases: a man with a bottle of aspirin, a boy with a package of trading cards, and a woman with a box of feminine napkins. John found his place in line just as all three turned to him and nodded, to which he nodded back and said, "Evening. Evening. Evening."

 The clerk at the counter didn't even acknowledge the presence of his patrons as he took the items out of their hands, scanned them, and returned them to the buyer, stating the total. He never once gave a greeting, made eye contact, or concluded with any sort of phony appreciation. He showed absolutely no interest in establishing a rapport with his customers.

 When it was John's turn at the counter he had the audacity to actually ask a question. "Where are the contraceptives?"

 "Male or female?" the clerk asked sans a pause.

 "Well, I am a male, you know."

 "Aisle 5, section 6. If you need the higher priced items there I'll have to unlock the case for you." The clerk made eye contact for the first time. "Will you be needing any of the higher priced items?"

 "I don't know. I'll try to avoid it."

 "I'd appreciate that."

 John found his way to aisle five in the six-aisle-wide store and began to count the sections, when a woman stepped across from a side aisle and bumped into him. "Excuse me," the woman apologized.

 "No need. No harm done."

 "I think I'm in the wrong aisle for coffee."

 "Probably. Maybe you should ask the gentleman at the counter."

 "Him? I'd rather go without coffee than ask him anything!"

 "I know what you mean. Now let me see." John gazed around the store for a moment and then spotted a sign. "There's a sign over there that says, 'Beverages.' Do you think the coffee might be there?"

 "I already tried there. It’s all just cold drinks. I guess I'll just have to ask."

 John's eyes stuck to the woman as she moved toward the counter. The scent of her perfume invaded his olfactory lobes and the sight of her auburn hair flipping as she walked hypnotized him.

 "Where's your coffee?" she asked the preoccupied clerk.

 "Sorry, lady. We don't carry coffee. This is a drug store."

 "Caffeine’s a drug, wouldn't you say?"

 "Gee, lady, I just work here. I don't own the joint."

 "You have cold soda, don't you?"

 "Yeah, but that's for people to drink on the drive home. I don't know too many people who make a pot of coffee in their car."

 The woman could only shake her head as she walked away. "Moron."

 "Have a nice day,” his voice rose a bit, “Bitch!"

 John stood in the same place throughout that entire exchange. His breathing accelerated while he watched and now increased even more. He took a big swallow, and then walked toward the door.

 "Change your mind, sport?" the clerk asked as John went by the counter.

 "Uh, yes, I mean, I couldn't - you don't – uh, you're out of coffee."

 "But you wanted - We're not-” again he kept talking once the object of his words had departed, “We don't have any coffee!"

 John tried not to run once he was in the parking lot, but a severe sense of dread overwhelmed him as though if he didn't catch up to her he might be passing up the chance of a lifetime. Was it her long auburn hair? Or was it her eyes? It couldn't have just been her perfume. If a fat, ugly girl had worn the same scent would she have been even half as magnetic?

 Struggling to open her car door, the woman cussed and mumbled while John slowed his pace and then strolled up to his own car door. "Having trouble?"

 "No, not really. This damn thing opens hard anyway, and when I get pissed off," she threw herself into her yanks, "it makes it - that much - harder!" Finally, it opened. "See? I got it."

 "Are you from around here?"

 "Not usually. But I have a job that I'm doing in the area for awhile and I'm renting an apartment over on Elm."

 "Really? What do you do?"

 "I'm a biogenetic engineer."

 "Really? What do they do?"

 "Well, it's really pretty complicated."

 "It sounds fascinating. It must be an exciting profession."

 "Actually, it's pretty frustrating. I'm sorry. I should introduce myself. I'm Cassiopeia Lynwood. My friends call me Cassie."

 "That's a pretty name." John moved around the front of his car and leaned on the fender. "My name is John Rah. I live over on State Street with my, uh, with all the trees. You should drive down State Street and see all the trees."

 "What kind of trees are they?"

 "Really big. And then some are, uh, not quite as big. But we probably have more trees on State Street than any other street in town."

 "Well, John, what do you do, besides look at trees?"

 "Compared to what you do, I feel embarrassed to say."

 "Why should you feel embarrassed?"

 "It's just not very exciting. I'm a cost accountant for a large corporation."

 "Really? Which one?"

 "Which what?"

 "Which corporation?"

 "Oh, I have no idea. I actually work for a sub-contractor that takes these jobs and then gives us the figures and only general facts about the products. You see, this way we can't give away any pertinent information to competitors, seeing as how we know exact costs on almost every single item they make and distribute."

 "Wow! So as far as you know you could be figuring data on nuclear warheads, crack cocaine, or even -"

 "Coffee."

 "That's weird."

 "I suppose it may seem that way. But it is so mundane that when I get out of there of an evening I try to look for just about any kind of excitement I can find." John stepped closer to Cassiopeia. "Say, I realize that we don't know each other very well, but I was just wondering if you wouldn't like to go somewhere and -"

 "Have some coffee?"

 John's eyes shifted around a bit and then refocused onto Cassie again. "Yeah, that's what I was going to say. Have some coffee. We could go somewhere and have some coffee. That'd be different."

 "I just hate some of the things I have to do because my boss is such an asshole." Cassie held her coffee cup and rotated it carefully between her hands. "He's a lot like this coffee cup. If you're careful you can manipulate him without incident. But one mistake and he's all over you and you're going to get burned badly."

 John didn't quite get the analogy. "I suppose. But then again if you set him down and only sip from him as needed, your chances of getting burnt are reduced greatly."

 Laughing, "What does that mean?"

 "I'm not sure, but I was only trying to stay with the coffee theme."

 Cassie reached out and lightly stroked John's cheek. "You're funny."

 "Really?"

 "Hasn't anyone ever told you that before?"

 "No, it's never come up. But then again I've never been with anyone that I felt like laughing with. Good Lord! I think I just ended a sentence with a preposition."

 "So?"

 "So - How about another cup of coffee?"

 "Are you sure you won't get in trouble with anyone?"

 John took hold of Cassie's hand and pulled it from his face, but held it tightly. "I suppose I should make a confession to you, although I have no idea why I'm so compelled to."

 "What is it, John?"

 "I am currently married."

 Cassie, neither stunned nor appalled by the revelation, never looked away from John. "I sort of figured that out."

 "Really?"

 "Somehow I had the idea that you couldn't possibly be so lonely as to refer to a tree as someone you live with."

 "That was really pretty moronic, wasn't it?"

 "You're not going to try to tell me that your wife doesn't understand you, are you?"

 "No, that's not really a fair assessment of our relationship. We've known each other since we were in grade school. And I suppose that we may have loved each other once. But I'm not sure I really know what that means. It seems so important to everyone that we identify what it is that we love about each other, and ever since we decided that we wanted to be divorced those same people want to know what it is that we don't love about each other. And since I never knew the answer to the first question I suppose that's why I can't answer the second."

 "How old are you, John?"

 "I'm twenty-nine. And I guess that's part of it. Soon I'm going to be thirty and I don't feel any sense of accomplishment. How old are you?"

 "I'm twenty-seven."

 "See. You're a biogenetic, uh, whatever, and you're two years younger than I am."

 "You both want to get divorced?"

 "Yes, I even have a divorce lawyer working on it."

 "That's sad."

 "Sad? Sad." John looked out the window of the coffee shop. "Do you know what's really sad? My life is a clock. Tick, tock. I'm awake. Tick, tock. Breakfast. Tick, tock. Work. Tick, tock. Lunchtime. Tick, tock. Time to go home. And then what should be an exciting and stimulating time for my wife and I is nothing more than a scripted predictable exchange that never changes, never changes, never changes. If I kept a journal I could simply copy the entry from last night into tonight and tonight's into tomorrow night's. It's no different for her, I'm sure. I've tried different things. I'm sure she has, too."

 "What things?"

 "You're not the first woman I've seen outside of my marriage. You're just the first woman who I've had coffee with on the first encounter. Or is it, whom I've had coffee with?"

 "Do you always analyze your grammar so closely?"

 "Normally I don't have to - do that."

 Cassie leaned back and smiled. "So you wanted to have sex with me tonight?"

 "No! Well, yes. I don't know. It never seemed like such a big deal - until tonight."

 "Well, let's just say I'm one of your previous conquests and we've just met. What do you say that makes me want to have sex with you?"

 "Do you want to have sex?"

 "That's it?"

 "Pretty much. But I don't know - I started to blurt that out back there in the drugstore parking lot - but I just couldn't do it. Even though I look at you and I know that I have never met anyone like you, I've never seen eyes that are softer, hair that's lovelier, and I've never been hypnotized by someone's scent - maybe it's because of all that I couldn't approach you the same way."

 "Maybe."

 "I'm about to ask something that I've never asked before."

 "Go ahead."

 "Will you be offended if we don't have sex tonight?"

 First her head moved toward John, stopped halfway across the table, and Cassie's lips pursed as she moved the rest of the way and kissed John for a few seconds. "I think that's about the sweetest thing that you could have asked me."

 "John, you have to press the RETURN key for the data to be entered."

 Staring at his computer first and then at his supervisor, John gave puzzled glance and said, "I know that."

 "Then do it. You've been staring at your monitor for about four minutes. Another minute and your screen saver’s going to kick in."

 "Sorry." John hit the RETURN key as though he were some sort of genius. "There. I did it."

 "Great. You just passed basic data entry. What's going on in your head? I've never seen you act like this before."

 "Nothing. Marsha and I are going through a divorce."

 "So? You've been talking about that for the last six months. This morning you're acting like you're in another world."

 "Do I really need to be here today?"

 "The big R wants all these files updated by Monday morning. He's working on that new contract for us."

 "But working Saturday sucks."

 John's supervisor dropped his jaw and stepped back. "What did you say?"

 "I said, working on Saturday sucks."

 "We've worked Saturdays before."

 "Yes, and it always sucked."

 "John, I've never heard you talk like this before."

 "Before. Before what? Before now? What am I? Some preprogrammed gadget that has to follow the pattern that everyone else has decided for me. Look, goddamn it! I'm here. I'm keying in your precious little figures. So I spaced out in front of the monitor for four minutes. Big fucking deal! If you don't like the way I act then fire me. Then I could go home, which is where I want to be in the first place."

 "Relax!" He held out his hands and waved them toward John. "I'm sorry. I guess this whole deal with you and Marsha is putting some stress on you."

 "Well, I'm just a little pissed off."

 "John, I don't think I remember you using -"

 John raised his eyebrows and pointed at his boss.

 "Nevermind. Listen, finish up the total expenditures on Project Sixty-Six and then go on home. I'll get Matt or James to finish up the Ninety-Five Proposal numbers. Okay?"

 "Okay."

 As his supervisor walked away, John feigned keying in data until he was out of sight. He reached over to the phone and pressed 411.

"Information. What city please?"

 "Mountain View. The name is Cassiopeia Lynwood."

 "I'm sorry, I have no listing under that name."

 "Really? Nothing on Elm Street?"

 "I have no listing at all."

 "Thank you."

 John twisted his head in different directions, looking around the room at nothing, trying to figure out why Cassie wouldn't be listed with the phone company. Maybe she was too new or hadn't been hooked up yet.

 Within fifteen seconds of his hanging up the phone, it rang.

 "Hello, this is John."

 "Hi, John. It's Cassie."

 "Cassie? I was just trying to call you."

 "Really?"

 "Yes, but the phone company doesn't have you listed."

 "Oh, yeah. I've got an unlisted number."

 "How did you know where to call me?"

 "Uh, you gave me your number. Remember?"

 "I did? Well, no matter. I'm just glad you called. I wanted to tell you what a wonderful time I had last night."

 "Me, too."

 "And I'd like to see you again, real soon."

 "Really?"

 "Yes, really. I couldn't get you out of my mind all night long. And, believe me, it wasn't just sex I was thinking about."

 Cassie's laughter came through loud and clear.

 "What did I say?"

 "Nothing. It's all right, John. It's okay to think about the two of us making love. I thought about it myself through the night."

 "I just don't want to give you the impression that's all I'm interested in – Cassie."

 "Look, John. Why don't you come by my apartment later today? I'll make some dinner, we can listen to some music, or we can talk – then we'll just see where the evening takes us. Okay?"

 "Okay. That's on Elm Street, right?"

 "Yes. 101 Elm, apartment 3A on the third floor. You'll know the building when you see my old clunker out front."

 "Your old clunker?"

 "My car."

 "Oh, of course. What time?"

 "The sooner the better."

 "I can be done here in about twenty minutes."

 "Give me an hour. Okay?"

 "Great! I'll see you at," he looked at his watch, "eleven-thirty."

 "Until then."

 John dropped the phone into its slot and began doing something that he hadn't done in a very long time. John whistled.

 As he entered the kitchen John stopped to take in the aroma of the room, but then scowled a bit. Instead of the heady scent of bacon and eggs cooking, he detected a strong tobacco dominance. In the family room, past the dining area, a cloud of smoke lingered above one of the recliners and trailed back to Marsha sitting there, smoking a long, slim cigarette.

 "Marsha, are you smoking?"

 Marsha blew out a large puff of smoke. "Good guess."

 "You're smoking?"

 "What’s the big deal? So I’m smoking."

 "I've just never seen you smoke. And you didn't make breakfast."

 "I wasn't hungry. Kelly and I were out rather late last night."

 "Really? Where did you go?"

 "Nowhere special. We watched a movie at her apartment."

 John hunted through the contents of the refrigerator. "That old Bette Davis movie?"

 "It's Bette Midler."

 "How was it?"

 "I'm not sure. We only watched about twenty minutes of it."

 "Did the player quit on you?"

 "John, why did you stop telling me you love me?"

 John stood, the refrigerator door agape. "I beg your pardon?"

 "Why did you stop telling me,” she took in a breath, “that you love me?"

 "Have I missed something? We've been through this before. It's why we decided to get a divorce."

 "I know. But we never really talked about why. Ever since I've known you we always said it. And then you stopped. I still said it."

 "Yes, but when you said, 'I love you,' it's the same way you say, 'I love doughnuts,' or 'I love kittens.' But what happened to the romance, the hugging and kissing, the looking into each other's eyes and being able to say, 'I love you,' without even speaking a word?"

 "But you quit doing that, too."

 "I don't think we quit doing that. I don't believe we ever did. We were thrown together like two lab rats and told to perform. So we performed until it all played out and there wasn't anything else for us to discover - or rather until we realized we hadn’t discovered anything."

 Marsha looked at John for a moment and then she continued to watch the smoke rise from her own cigarette.

 "Marsha, do you remember your parents living?"

 "Of course, I do. They only passed on this last year."

 "No, I mean, really living. I don't remember my parents having any sort of life where they were allowed to have fun, ignore me, and just enjoy life. All I remember is a set of walking, talking encyclopedias that spent their whole day helping me with my homework, or teaching me about the birds and the bees and then explaining the evils of adolescent masturbation. But if they ever took two minutes to just enjoy each other I never saw it."

 "They were your parents. It's what parents do."

 "No. Living life is what they were supposed to do. Sometimes I think that they died because they had nothing left to teach me - and they were so wrong!"

 Marsha took one more drag on her cigarette. "I'm sorry, John. I'm sorry, and I don't even know why - or at least I didn't until I discovered something about myself. Last night I wandered into to a setting that seemed perfectly harmless and extremely pleasurable, or at least had possibilities. And yet halfway through the night it occurred to me that the nervous stomach I had all week, which I attributed to bad pork, was anticipation. I never really anticipated anything with you, and I certainly don't remember being queasy before a date or even before we were married. And then I knew - I was in love."

 Both of John's eyebrows went up. "So - you love women now?"

 "No, John. I love Kelly. And you know, I don't know if she loves me. I don't even know if she can love me - but I felt it, and it's real. And if it falls apart between us I may very well learn to love another man. But I'll never mistake that queasy feeling again - and if there is someone and I don't feel it, I don't think I'll perform like lab rats."

 For a full sixty seconds they stopped talking, stopped thinking, and stopped wondering. There were no more words to say, no more points to make.

 Until -

 "Marsha?"

 "Yes, John."

 "I'm going now."

 "Brilliant. Brilliant!" Dr. Renfro turned off the video monitor on the wall of his office. "My faith in your ability has been restored."

 Cassie sat on the couch along the opposite wall and neither smiled nor scowled at Renfro's praise. Her eyes were fixed on a point somewhere in the office, but she didn't appear to be focused on anything in particular. If someone grabbed her head and rotated it in any direction her eyes would have moved right along with it.

 "You have guaranteed the continuation of this project into the next century and maybe even further." Dr. Renfro strained to get to his feet and toddled to the window. "After Dr. Claypool's failure over the last few months I had no idea that you would be able to pull this off so quickly."

 "Dr. Claypool didn't exactly fail. I think it's possible that she began his thought process moving toward a direction out of the mold he was used to. If you think of her as a decoy you may begin to understand how effective real game was to him. Besides, I can tell. He's been questioning his entire existence for a long time. It just took this weekend to shake him up."

 Renfro shook as he chuckled. "You think of yourself as game?"

 Cassie didn't answer.

 "Do I detect a conflict of emotions with you and your subject?"

 "I did my job. What the hell difference does it make to you whether or not I got a bit too personal with my subject?"

 "Indeed! Indeed! After all, we're not setting cultural morality. But I think it's important that you recognize the significance of your success. The Senate would have sunk this project next month, 61 to 59. Now you've helped clear the way for the first biogenetic human production in twenty-seven years."

 "You mean twenty-nine years."

 "Well, it's been a long time, but it's only been twenty-seven years."

 "Axel, I don't know what you're trying to prove, but John and Marsha are from the Sixty-Six batch."

 Dr. Renfro took slow rhythmic steps to the couch where Cassie sat. "Oh, that's quite correct. But even in Sixty-Six we had our doubts that the whole concept of raising biogenetically produced humans in a hermetically sealed environment was the best way to go. So in Sixty-Eight we developed a new and improved strain, without the knowledge of the Senate. The idea was that these subjects would be exposed to the hard and complicated world of the Twenty-First Century, not the safe simpler lifestyle of the Twentieth Century. We weren't sure that they would produce anything worthwhile." Axel stood next to the couch and put his hand on Cassie's shoulder. "But you and Dr. Claypool turned out to be our biggest successes."

 Cassie breathed in, but not out. In one clean jerk, she dropped her shoulder from Axel's touch and jumped to her feet. "God damn you, Axel! You're lying to me!"

 "Oh, now. Don't act so shocked! You and Kelly had to be suspicious that your lives were preordained. You go to the same grade school, high school, college, and graduate school. You receive degrees in the same field. And now I tell you why, and you act shocked."

 "But what about all those times that I argued the impact of a random social environment on the test subjects? You kept telling me I was wrong."

 "You must forgive me about that one. I just can't resist playing the devil’s advocate."

 "Why? Why this whole charade?"

 "The Sixty-Six project had to be proclaimed a success because the Sixty-Eight project doesn't even exist in the government's view. And who better to make bland human replicants more emotional than their fiery replicant counterparts."

 Cassie gazed out the window of the penthouse office onto a view of hovering vehicles buzzing through a maze of tall, mirrored skyscrapers, reflecting the vision of blue skies and clouds above and people passing through transparent tubes elbow to elbow below. "You bastard!"

 "But you must look on the bright side, Dr. Lynwood. When you first made contact with Mr. Rah you thought you had as much in common with him as an eagle has with a housefly. Now you have a lot more to talk about."

 "You bastard!"

*I had to be helped out of the car and into the house. My hands weren’t bound or cuffed, but the man never took his hand off my shoulder except once to grab my upper arm while we walked up a couple steps. The sound of wood creaking on every step I took on the porch added to the whole effect of the dilapidated dwelling. Had there been someone inside it would have been as good as a doorbell to note my arrival. The odd thing, something I didn’t notice until we reached the door, wasn’t the noise my feet made… but the absence of noise for the other two with me. Her weight could easily have been half of mine, but the man tipped the scales close to my size, if not larger. Yet their footsteps remained silent.*

 *“Inside,” the man said as he twisted the knob and shoved me forward. He didn’t display any anger or hostility, but he obviously wasn’t a friend.*

 *After we stumbled through a hallway to a room not facing the front of the house, the woman found a lamp to turn on and removed her jacket. “Have a seat somewhere, preferably away from a window.” She walked to the only window in the room and closed the drapes.*

 *I took a seat in a chair setting across from a couch, separated by a small coffee table needing a coat of varnish and covered in rings from varying sized cups. “You still haven’t answered my question.”*

 *“You’re serious,” the man said. “I thought you were playing with us.”*

 *The woman plopped onto the couch and put her feet up on the coffee table. “It would be a little strange for him to try to go for the insanity bit, seeing as how he’s not the one looking at doing time.”*

 *“Doing time?” I knew, and yet I didn’t know.*

 *“Yeah,” the man said. “They pretty much established you couldn’t have killed her. But you obviously know why she was killed. Otherwise, why would you have tried to get out of the country.”*

 *“I wasn’t trying to get out of the country… I had surgery.”*

 *“Yeah, yeah. You told us all that… But you seem fine now. And they caught you trying to board a plane to Scotland, of all places.”*

 *“I don’t know anyone in Scotland.”*

 *The woman reached into her case and pulled out a folder. “Wasn’t your wife from Ireland?” She opened the folder and read from a page somewhere in the middle of the stack of papers in it. “Yeah, it says she was born in the town of Boyle, but later moved to Belfast in Northern Ireland. She and her father were members of Sinn Féin… that is, until she moved to Scotland in the nineties… where you met her… Ringing any bells yet?”*

 *Dumbfounded scarcely painted the image of my expression.*

 *The man took the other end of the sofa. “So who killed her?”*

 *“Someone killed Nickie?”*

 *“Nickie?” the woman said. “Her name was Katherine.”*

 *“I don’t know anyone named Katherine. Nickie and I have been separated for a couple years now.”*

 *The man smiled and leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees and crossing his arms at the wrist. “You need to focus, Mr. Stevens. You’re not in a hospital, you haven’t had surgery, and you are not married to some fictitious lady named Nickie.”*

 *“You know my name?”*

 *“Of course I know your name.”*

 *“I don’t know you.”*

 *The man relaxed and fell back. “Really?”*

 *Dropping the folder on the coffee table, the woman stared over at her partner. “This is nuts. We’re trying to help him and all he wants to do is screw around.”*

 *“Okay, Mr. Stevens,” the man said. “We’ll play it your way. I’m Special Agent Dobbs and my partner here Lisa Strawn with the Department of Justice. We’re trying to keep you safe from the people who shot and killed your wife, Katherine Thornton-Stevens.” Dobbs looked to Strawn and said, “Show him her picture.”*

 *As she fished for a photo in the file in the coffee table, Strawn said, “You are as crazy as he is if you think he’s serious.”*

 *“Just show him the goddamn photo.”*

 *Looking away as she held up a small photo, Strawn let out an exasperated sigh and asked, “Does this ring any bells?”*

 *I studied the photo for what seemed like minutes but I’m sure was only seconds. The woman’s auburn hair draped alongside an oval face that took on near perfect symetry. In a depth piercing gaze, her eyes aimed at me directly accompanied by an indifferent purse of the lips like I had seen before when being rejected by this league of woman. But this wasn’t rejection. “I’m married to her?”*

**MARY**

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"They're playing God!"

 Ian MacLachlan shut his eyes in sheer disgust, pulled his beer stein up to his lips, and just held it there. "It's not playing God," Ian snarled. "It's just sheep, for fuck sake!" He swallowed a good inch or two of his ale and wiped a trace of foam from his moustache.

 "Aye, and they're God's creatures, aren't they?" The beer in Thomas Lancaster's glass left trails of foam at various levels from an inch above the bottom to the rim. When he tipped his glass, those close by could see remnants of peanut shells floating in his brew. "Just as soon as we're tellin' the almighty that we can do a better job than he, he'll be comin' to see us and not in a pleasant mood."

 "Yeah, well. He comes to see me I'll be asking about my own flock that I couldn't get more than 250 pounds for shearling rams come market time."

 "And you think this is our answer to a bad market?"

 "No! I'm sayin' I don't give a rat's ass about some shithead with a test tube getting sheep to breed without making them bump uglies. If it makes better sheep than more power to him."

 Same argument, different day. Lancaster and MacLachlan hadn't seen eye to eye on a subject since Thomas had moved to Kirkmichael from Dumfries some eight years earlier. Thomas brought his flock of Blackface ewes and rams from the lowlands along the British border to the Grampian Mountains, hoping to expand the flock in the old traditional way. Ian grew up in Perth, about sixty kilometers south of Kirkmichael. Raising sheep became a part of his life only after serving in WWII, selling stocks in London, crop farming in Canada, and returning to Scotland first to hunt for the Loch Ness creature and after that to become a professional golfer at St. Andrews. His first flock he bought from Thomas Lancaster and turned a profit by outlasting the market and cleaning up when Lancaster had caved some three weeks earlier. Neither man ever claimed to be a friend to the other, but one was never seen in town without the presence of the other.

 "They're making sheep from test tubes," Lancaster spoke as he belched. "How long will it be before they're making people from piss in the public can?"

 "I thought they already did that."

 "You mark my words, Ian MacLachlan, God is not smiling on the likes of man since that damn Finn Dorset named Dolly appeared in his kingdom. And you had to buy the damn thing's third generation product of Satan."

 "Satan was a goat, Thomas. Not a sheep, cloned or otherwise."

 "Ach! You're daft, you crazy shepherd!"

 "Yeah, well. I guess that makes me one of God's creatures. Ever since he breathed life into us and said, 'Be fruitful and multiply,' we just keep fucking up." Ian raised his nearly empty glass. "Still, you have to wonder about a God who puts a tree in the middle of a garden and says you can't eat the fruit. He had to know that was the first place we'd go as soon as his back was turned."

 "Ian, that's blasphemy. Why the good Lord doesn't strike you dead right here and now is beyond me."

 "Because Heaven's too exclusive ... and Hell is too full."

 The door of the pub swung open wide and a tall, lanky figure of a man stood in the light from outside with both hands on hips. No one on the inside could make out his face because of the silhouette created by the mid-afternoon sun. But his attire came right from LL Bean slash Eddie Bauer, a hunter green coat with a brown plaid lining laying over a beige flannel shirt and loose fitting jeans.

 The bartender leaned over to Ian and said, "Who the hell is that?"

 "I don't know, but if he's carrying a can of corn with him I'm getting the hell out."

 "Huh?"

 "Forget it."

 As he pulled the door shut, the visitor's face came into clear view, revealing a clean shave, thickly drawn eyebrows, and a set of vague blue eyes that peered into one's soul but never saw what really lay there. He smiled and glanced at some of the patrons while he said, "Top of the morning to you."

 Ian rolled his eyes. "Jesus Christ!"

 "Got to be an American," Thomas nearly whispered to Ian.

 "And a stupid one at that."

 The man strolled up to the bar, which opened up to him as he approached. As he looked through his wallet it almost appeared as though he was talking to it. "I wonder if you could tell me how much a glass of cold beer would be."

 The bartender looked down at the man's wallet. "How much have you got?"

 "Well, I'm not exactly sure how much a pound note is worth, but I've got about twenty of them on me right now."

 "How much is a glass of beer where you come from?"

 "Usually about two dollars."

 "You're in luck. Two pounds'll get you a beer, all right."

 "Great! Get me your finest lager, my good man. As long as it's only two pounds."

 Ian stared at the bartender while he drew the man's draft and shook his head. "Tell me, will you be charging the rest of us two pounds a draft today? 'Cause if you are I'm getting tanked across town where I can do it for a hell of a lot less."

 The bartender just looked at Ian.

 Thomas bellied up next to the stranger and set his glass down to signal the bartender he was ready for another. "So, young man. You're from America, then?"

 "Yes. I just got here in the highlands from Terre Haute, Indiana, yesterday. The name is Scott Newby."

 "What brings you to Scotland, Mr. Newby?"

 "Well, if you must know, I'm a writer, uh, reporter. I'm a writer reporter."

 "A newspaper man?"

 "Yes. Yes, I work for a newspaper in Terre Haute."

 Ian only looked at Newby out of the corner of his eye, and reaffixed his eyes on his glass. "You come all the way to Kirkmichael from Terre Haute, Indiana? Why?"

 Scott had to look around Thomas to see Ian. "Well, sir. My paper has sent me to this fine country for a story."

 "And what story would that be?"

 "Oh," Scott gazed around the pub for a moment and once again at Ian, "no particular story. Just a story."

 "No particular story. Just a story about our fair country, ay?"

 "Exactly." Scott picked up his beer and walked toward Ian's table. "My boss, the editor, is looking for a colorful story about life in this country. You know, what it's like to live in the green highlands, the land of lads and lasses, the Loch Ness monster, and so on. He wants -" he stopped cold and stared at the other side of the pub. "What the hell?"

 Standing in the shadows past the tables and tied to a coat and hat stand, a small ewe shook its head and gave a muffled bleat while it nibbled on a salad in a bowl lying on the floor in front of it.

 "It's a sheep."

 Ian raised one of his bushy eyebrows. "Well. How about that? You really are a crack reporter."

 "What the hell is a sheep doing here?"

 "You mean you don't let sheep in the bars in Terre Haute?"

 "Uh, no." Scott remained frozen. "Is it tame?"

 Thomas turned on his stool. "Of course she's tame. Otherwise Chop here," he pointed to the bartender, "would make me keep her outside."

 The object of all the scrutiny once again belted out a loud bleat as if objecting to Scott's attitude.

 "Is it housebroke?"

 Ian grinned and shook his head. "Probably not. But then again neither is her shepherd."

 Just drunk enough to be insulted by Ian's remark, Thomas downed his whole glass of brew and came to his feet. "That about does it, Ian MacLachlan. When you start telling an imbecilic Yank that I can't keep my own drawers clean, I take those as fighting words." Thomas made two fists and twirled them in Ian's face. "Defend yourself."

 "Lancaster, take your sheep and go home. I'll not take pot shots at an old fool who could be my own father."

 "Your father, ay?" Thomas began to shuffle his feet. "Come on, you lily livered bastard. Put up or shut up."

 Now the bartender got involved. "Hey, Thomas. You know when you start picking fights in my bar it's time to go home."

 "I'll go home when this Godless piece of shit apologizes to me."

 "Do me a favor, MacLachlan. Apologize to Lancaster so we can go back to quiet drinking."

 Ian grabbed one of Thomas's fists and held it tight. "Relax, old friend. You wouldn't want to hurt the only man in town who'll carry your coffin without being paid."

 "Aye, you're daft, Ian MacLachlan." Finally Thomas lowered his hands and walked over to the ewe and untied her from the coat rack. "Come, Abagail. Before one of these sadistic animals develop a craving for mutton." Thomas held the rope as he walked out of the pub, but Abagail stayed in perfect step without pulling the rope taught. She cut loose with one more bleat as she scraped against the doorway.

 Scott's feet remained planted in the same spot as when he first saw the strange patron. "Any other surprises in here? Maybe a cow or a pig playing poker in the back?"

 Chop leaned on the bar and gazed at the back of Scott's head. "Not today."

 "What about another drink, Indiana?" Ian asked as he sat again.

 Scott looked into his beer that was only missing a couple swallows. "Uh, not just yet. I think I better finish this one and find a place to stay."

 "Come on. Take a load off. I'm old, but I don't bite."

 "Don't mind if I do." Back to moving like the lumbering oaf he appeared, Scott swung his leg over the back of one of the chairs at Ian's table and plopped into the seat, nearly breaking it.

 Ian leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Did I hear you say that you were looking for a place to stay? You mean, you didn't get a hotel room in advance?"

 "No. I kind of live life one day at a time. You know, step around each corner and face what lays before you."

 Ian nodded. "I can see where that might be exciting. But tell me, what happens when what lays before you is a hotel with no vacancies."

 "Well, I've got my bedroll on the Land Rover out front. I can just rough it in the beautiful Scottish countryside."

 "Really? Do you have a sleeping bag that stays warm below freezing?"

 "Actually, yes. My bag is rated to twenty-eight degrees."

 "That's good, because it gets down to about twenty-five degrees, Fahrenheit, this time of year. In the summer the midnight sun rises not far from here. But Kirkmichael nights in November are dark and cold." Ian's eyes moved slowly over the young Scott, accessing something of him that perhaps wasn't openly apparent. "Is there someone at home ... who is special to you?"

 "Special, how?"

 "Well, you know ... special?"

 "Like a girlfriend?"

 "Could be. Could be."

 "No. I don't have a girlfriend."

 "No other sort of special person?"

 "Well, there's my mother. She lives in Terre Haute."

 "I've always said, a mother is a boy's best friend." Ian took another long tug on his beer. "I guess what I'm driving at is if there was someone special at home, uh, who or what would ..."

 Scott's eyebrows came down in the middle and his mouth was slightly agape.

 "Are you a poofter?"

 "I'm sorry. A what?"

 "A poof? A fairy? A bleeding homosexual?"

 Scott shook his head and reared backwards. "Why are you asking?"

 "It's not that I'm being judgmental, but this is a quiet little town, and .... Well, are you?"

 "NO! I don't even like peeing in front of another man."

 After a long exhale, Ian replied, "I was just curious. You see, I was wondering if you would like to come and stay at my place with my daughter and me."

 "And that depended on whether I was straight or not?"

 "Not exactly. But if I go home with a strange man, my daughter is going to start thinking certain things and wondering about him. You're not married, and you're not gay. My next question is, do you like redheads?"

 "Look, Mr. Mc - Mc -"

 "Call me Ian."

 "Okay, Ian. If you're inviting me to stay with you and your daughter during my stay, I accept. But if you're wondering whether or not I'm interested in developing a relationship at this point in my life, I'd have to say thanks but no thanks. I am a lot like the man making his way up the small hill, realizing a sense of his accomplishment, and looking again to the next bigger hill. A relationship would only weight down the climb."

 Ian smiled. "Whatever you say?"

 "I would like you to meet Mary."

 Scott walked past Ian and looked into the stable, assuming his daughter was working in there. "It's a pleasure to meet ... you." Once again, Scott was face to face with a woolen creature. "She's a sheep."

 "You catch on quick."

 "I thought Mary was your daughter."

 "Arial is my daughter. Mary is my pride and joy." Ian knelt beside the ewe and embraced her the same way most people hug dogs. "I named her after the nursery rhyme. You know, Mary Had a Little Lamb. Only in this case, Mary is a little lamb."

 Scott's expression carried a trace of interest in his smile, but his eyes were round and shifting, not quite enamored by the sheep as much as Ian. "It's a nice looking sheep, I guess."

 "Oh, she's more than a nice looking sheep. Do you know who her grandmother was?"

 "Queen Elizabeth?"

 "Don't be a wise ass! Have you ever heard of Dolly?"

 "The one with Barbara Streisand or Carol Channing?"

 "That's two. One more and I'll throw your Yank ass out of here."

 "Okay, okay. I give up. Who's Dolly?"

 "Dolly is a Finn Dorset ewe who was born not of impassioned parents but of ingenious scientists."

 Scott's light bulb hadn't been illuminated yet. "Maybe you should presume I have no idea what you're talking about, because I haven't."

 "Dolly is a clone."

 Mary shook her head and let out a sharp bleat and sneezed.

 Ian patted the back of Mary's neck and said, "Bless you."

 "A clone? You mean like Jurassic Park clones?"

 "Something like that."

 "I thought that was stuff you only found in science fiction."

 "Well, you know, Flash Gordon went into outer space almost thirty years before real astronauts did. What's science fiction today is science fact tomorrow."

 "You said Mary is Dolly's granddaughter."

 "Yes, I had one of my healthiest ewes bred by Randy, a prize ram who happens to be the son of Dolly. Mary was the result of that union."

 Once more, Mary cut loose with a big sneeze.

 "Bless you."

 "She's not allergic to wool, is she?"

 Another voice from outside startled both men. "She has a cold." The woman who spoke walked into the stable and immediately hugged Mary around the neck. She reached into a bag in her coat pocket and pulled out a large pill. "Doc Weir says we should give her this."

 Ian disapproved. "What the hell is that?"

 "It's an analgesic. He said it'll clear her sinuses."

 "It'll also knock her out for a day or two. At least while she's standing her lungs are staying clear. Why didn't Weir come here himself?"

 "He's on his way to Ireland to help out a friend of his with some birthing cattle. He'll be back in a fortnight." She looked at Scott and back at Ian as she pulled an inhaler from her pocket and took a breath from it. "Who the hell is this?"

 "Scott Newby, my daughter, Arial MacLachlan. Arial, Scott."

 Arial waved. "Any friend of my father's ..."

 "Pleased to please you, I mean, meet you."

 Ian rolled his eyes. "Oh, brother."

 Arial set a bowl of potatoes on the table in front of Ian and Scott. Both men reached for the fork but Scott retreated. "By all means, after you."

 "Thanks. Then would you hand me the butter."

 "Sure. Do you have any sour cream?"

 "No. But I'll bet there's a quart of rancid milk in the icebox."

 "Sorry, Ian. But sour cream is a topping we use on ..."

 "Forget it, boy. I was kidding. I'll have Arial pick some up at Wal-Mart in Pitlochry tomorrow." To Arial, Ian said, “I noticed you were using your inhaler again today. Maybe you should get another pack from the chemist there.”

 “I’m fine, Ian,” Arial said. “You know how winter always plays with my asthma.”

 "You people have Wal-Mart over here?" Scott asked.

 "Wal-Mart, Burger King, Keebler Cookies. Did you know MacDonald’s was originally a Scot's idea?"

 "Really?"

 "Sure. Who else but a Scot would pawn off 2 millimeters of meat as a hamburger?"

 Arial returned and began to fill her own plate. "Ian says you're a writer."

 Ian interrupted, "Actually I said he claims he's a writer."

 "Well," Scott stammered through his answer, "I, uh, have done some writing for the, uh, newspaper. Quite a bit, in fact."

 "Exactly what have you written?"

 "A few, uh, articles. One on a string of robberies in my neighborhood, another on pollution in Terre Haute, and, uh .... Oh, yeah! I had a biting commentary on the 2000 Presidential Election. Some people said my le - I mean, article may have single handedly caused Bush to carry the county."

 "Jesus! Woodward and Bernstein have nothing on you."

 "Really? Do they write here in Scotland?"

 Ian dropped his fork. "All the President's Men?"

 Scott gazed at Ian for a moment and, "Oh, that Woodward and Bernstein."

 Amused by the banter of her father and Scott, Arial picked and stirred at her plate and watched the two men like a tennis match.

 While Arial and Ian washed the dishes, Scott wandered through the house and examined every artifact and memento on display. A large majority of the pictures were Arial posing with an array of sheep, from lambs to ewes to rams. But another whole section of pictures was devoted to Ian dressed in casual clothes and posing with some recognizable men, such as Fuzzy Zellor, Lee Trevino, and Jack Nicklaus.

 "A trifle out of character," Arial said as she watched Scott from the doorway, "isn't it?"

 "Does Ian know all these guys?"

 "Most likely. He used to play in the PGA tour."

 "Was he any good?"

 "He was able to hold his own, but he never won any big tournaments. I call that his dimpled ball phase."

 "Where is Ian?"

 Arial sat in the armchair by the fireplace with one leg draped over the arm. "He's taking a look at Mary. Her cold is getting worse."

 "What's he going to do for her?"

 "If I know Ian, he's covered her with a blanket and is singing her Gaelic lullabies."

 "You call your father by his first name?"

 "What should I call him? MacLachlan?"

 "How about Father or plain old Dad?"

 "Ian hasn't been 'Dad' to me since he left Mother and me for his moose ball phase to farm in Canada."

 "Where is your mother now?"

 "I say Heaven, Dad says Purgatory. I think he still has some resentment."

 "I'm sorry."

 "No need to be. She passed on about five years after Ian left home. That's when I came to know Ian the pro golfer. We both got reacquainted and realized that we still loved each other, even if he was not the traditional Scot Father."

 "You said that Ian left your mother, but he has resentment."

 "I've not a clue as to why they chucked it in, but I know there was more to it than Ian just deciding to farm in Canada. My mother could be quite the bitch when she wanted to be. And yes, I adored her." Arial sat up in the chair and put both feet on the floor. "Enough about us. What's the story about living in America?"

 "Living in America? It's a combination of your worst nightmare, a crowded elevator, and an ongoing civil war all rolled into one. My first twelve hours in Scotland have had more relaxation than I've had on my last five vacations."

 "Looking for boredom, are you?"

 "Maybe." Scot moved to the window and looked out onto the green pasture that served as virtual artwork. "Or maybe an escape."

 "Hey, Old Man, where are you?" Ian stood on the porch of his arch-nemesis Thomas Lancaster, peering through the window and knocking on the door. "Come on, Thomas. It's Ian MacLachlan. I need some advice. You can't pass that up."

 No sounds stirred from inside the house.

 Ian gazed out onto the nearby field where Thomas's sheep were gathered. They seemed to be calm and focused on something near the barn where they bedded for the night. As Ian scanned the field he saw his old friend lying on the ground by the barn.

 "Oh shit!"

 Off the porch, two steps to the fence, and a half straddle / half leap over the fence, Ian ran as fast as an old man could to where Thomas lay. As he approached the flock that seemed to be guarding their shepherd, Ian slapped their flanks to push them out of his way. Their cries sounded more like mourning than pain as they shuffled away from Ian.

 Thomas lay face down in front of the doorway of the barn with both hands clutching his chest. Ian rolled him over on his back and pressed his hand against Thomas's throat. After a few seconds he lowered his head within inches of his old friend's face, trying to feel a puff of breath.

 "Oh, shit!"

 Nothing pulsated in the old man's throat, no air flowed from his nostrils, his body was hard like a tree, and his skin was cold.

 Ian ran his fingers over Thomas's eyes, which were slightly open, and pulled them shut. "Good bye, Old Friend."

 Standing next to Ian, watching everything he had done for Thomas, the ewe that had followed her shepherd into town on many occasions now seemed to be lost. At first she only gazed blankly at her master's corpse, but let out a loud bleat as though trying to bring Thomas back from the dead. Ian reached out his hand to stroke her head and spoke softly, "Poor Abagail. They never prepare the sheep for the loss of their shepherd. Right now you must know how the Disciples felt on Good Friday."

 "But we just talked to him yesterday," Scott said as he took a swig of his beer.

 "Yeah? Well, what's that supposed to mean?" Ian only looked at his glass.

 "It's just weird, that's all. I can still hear his voice in my head."

 "You? I've been hearing that voice for the last eight years. I knew his heart was bad but I thought he'd hang in there a few more years."

 "What did you do with the, well, you know ... body?"

 "Nothing. Do I look like a fucking undertaker? I carried his remains into the house, called the police and they took care of the rest. The constable said it looked like he'd been dead long enough for rigor mortis to set in. He probably laid out there all night."

 "What about family?"

 "He's got a sister in Aberdeen and a nephew in Belfast."

 "Belfast? Ireland?"

 "No. Nicaragua. Or course, Ireland." Ian stretched and winced with pain. "Not everybody over here stays in the same gene pool. Didn't members of your family make it out of Indiana?"

 "Some. Are you all right?"

 "Not exactly. I think I may have thrown my back out carrying Lancaster up to his house."

 The bartender approached the table and handed Ian an envelope. "Here's a little something they gathered passing the hat. The other boys and I were wondering if you would give this to either the church or his sister, or what have you."

 "Thanks. How much is in here?"

 "About thirty pounds."

 "How much was Thomas's bar slate?"

 "Probably about the same."

 "Why don't you just keep it?"

 Chop looked down at the floor. "Ian, I've ran this pub for four years now. I've never had a time where Thomas Lancaster didn't owe something on his slate. I'm not about to start now just 'cause the old goat has moved on."

 Ian tucked the envelope into his jacket pocket and nodded at Chop and the other men around the bar.

 "This would be a great story," Scott said, "if it weren't so sad."

 "What do you mean? Sad stories always make a good read. Problem with this story is it isn't sad enough."

 "But Thomas is dead."

 "And someday soon so will I be, and then Chop there, some of the other boys, and then even you. We all die, it's just a matter of when. Thomas met his maker maybe a little sooner than he anticipated, but he led a full life. Even me .... If I walk out of here right now and drop dead in the street, there's not one thing left that I wish I would have accomplished. Sure I've made mistakes, but who hasn't."

 "That all sounds so simplistic, maybe even nihilistic."

 "Don't kid yourself, boy. Even Shakespeare worried about the great beyond. 'To die, to sleep. To sleep, per chance to dream. Ah, there is the rub.' Write something like that and you just might make people think about themselves, not who the fuck they're going to vote for in an election. Analysts and journalists write news. An author is someone who can make people think about their own mortality and have a good time doing it."

 Scott stared at his beer mug. "Ian, there's something I think I should tell you. I'm not really an author ... or a writer. I work in the shipping department of the Terre Haute Daily News. Those articles I told you about were just letters to the editor."

 "I know."

 "You knew? How did you know?"

 "I have no idea if you could be a good writer or a bad one ... but you are a horrible actor. Besides, no editor is going to send a greenhorn like yourself all the way across the ocean to get a story about nothing in particular. That wouldn't be in their budget."

 "I was telling the truth about coming here to write a piece about Scotland. The problem is that I've not really figured out how to approach the subject."

 "Haven't you? There is one figure in all this that stands out like a sore thumb and symbolizes everything that I've been talking about."

 "Thomas?"

 "No ... Mary."

 "Mary? Your sheep? That Mary?"

 "Yes, that Mary. She is the granddaughter of a clone. She's representative of mankind's desire to outwit finality. She exists because a few years ago a couple scientists found success in creating, or at least they thought they were creating, the embryo of a sheep without a male and female set of parents. I don't think they were deluding themselves exactly, but the whole idea has people thinking of immortality. In other words, when I get old I can have myself cloned and maybe I'll live another lifetime ... with one small problem. My soul is in the old body. And in my new body is another soul with other ideas, and maybe even a different idea about souls. So when you get right down to it all we've done is found a way of making babies without fucking, which is the most pleasurable part of the whole process anyway."

 "So why did you want Mary to be a breed of a clone?"

 "Because she was an investment. Sheep farmers in Scotland will always remember Dolly, the first cloned sheep. I had an opportunity to get my ewe bred at a reasonable price, maybe with thoughts that I was getting some sort of super sheep, and had visions of selling her someday to someone who wanted her simply because she was who she was."

 "So what happened?"

 "Arial and I spent so much time nursing her, feeding her, and grooming her that I fell in love with the damn thing."

 Scott's eyebrows raised and a sinister smile came over his face. "Would you mind rephrasing that a bit?"

 "Now, don't get cute. Until you've spent some time with these creatures of God, don't get the idea that you're above having affection for a sheep." Ian grimaced with pain and grabbed his back. "Jesus! Either I need more to drink or my back is really fucked up."

 "Maybe we should go home."

 "Great! I'm looking forward to a ride in that Land Rover of yours. Maybe I should get a bottle of scotch for the road."

 "One more road to go," Scott said as the truck jumped a couple feet in the air after driving through a hole in the road. "Take another hit on your bottle."

 Ian brought the bottle to his lips and took a hard swig. "Arrgg! Remind me to thank Chop for this six month old Scotch."

 "Back where I come from we call that moonshine."

 "Over here we call it shitty Scotch."

 Scott focused on the road in front of Ian's house and noticed something strange there. "What is that?"

 Ian strained his own drunken eyes. "It looks like Arial."

 Standing off to the side of the road, Arial waved her arms over her head and seemed to be pointing to the stable. Scott floored the accelerator and turned to Ian as the ride got rougher. "Sorry, Ian. Can you take it?"

 "Just get up there."

 As the Land Rover ran through the ditch next to Arial and stopped by the fence around the pasture, she ran up to the passenger side door and yanked it open, tugging on her inhaler every few seconds. "It's Mary… She's in trouble."

 "What's wrong?" Ian asked, trying to get out of the truck with one hand on his back.

 "She's not breathing right." Arial verged on tears as she grabbed her father's arm and dragged him over the fence.

 "Easy, girl. I'm not a hundred percent myself."

 "Come on."

 Scott ran along side of Ian's other side and took a hold of his elbow, dragging the ailing elder to the stable some fifty meters away. Ian's grunts of pain intermingled with him asking questions. "Was she on her feet? Did you get a heater into the stable? She's not laying down, is she?"

 "She probably is now. I tried to keep her up, but she was choking or gagging."

 They reached the stable door after a difficult maneuver through the pasture, and one of Ian's questions was answered when a wave of heat flowed through them just inside the door. Ian staggered over to Mary's stable and dropped to his knees next to her as she lay on the dirt floor. He laid his head onto her chest and remained still for a moment. "She's not breathing."

 "What?" Arial asked in a panic, still relying on her inhaler for breath.

 "I can't hear her breathe."

 Arial became hysterical. "You mean she's dead?"

 "She has a faint heartbeat. But I think she's drowning on her own phlegm." Ian grabbed his back again and fell backward onto the floor. "Oh, shit. Oh, shit!"

 "Daddy,” crying and out of breath, “you have to help her!"

 Ian glanced at Arial for a second and looked to Scott, staring him straight in the eye. "Boy, I need your help."

 "Me? Why me? I'm not a vet."

 "No, but you have a strong back and a strong set of lungs."

 "And?"

 "Just get over here. I want you to kneel in front of Mary, right in front of her nose."

 Scott slowly followed Ian's instruction, easing himself down in front of the comatose sheep and wondering how it happened that everything in the past few days led to this. "Now what?"

 "Now pick up her head by the snout and pull it toward you."

 "Why?"

 "Just do it and listen. I want you to cup your hands around her nose and mouth."

 "Okay."

 "Now take a deep breath."

 "Oh, Jesus! I know what you want me to do. I can't do it."

 "Yes, you can. Take a deep breath and push your face up against hers forming a seal around your mouth and her mouth and nose ... and blow."

 Scott just shook his head. "I can't do it."

 "Yes, God damn it! You can." Ian tried to get on his feet but fell back again before he barely lifted off the floor. "Look, Boy, I can't move. You have to do this. Put your mouth up against hers and blow!"

 Scott took a deep breath for himself and closed his eyes before he took one more breath for Mary. He seemed to grunt as his face disappeared in his hands. A rush of air pushing through animal flesh made strange sounds as it found its way through cracks between Scott's fingers. "Yarrghh!"

 "Do it again."

 "What?"

 "Do it again!"

 Once more, Scott drew in a huge chunk of air and pressed his face against the ewe in distress. And again. And again. But Mary was not responding.

 "Daddy," Arial cried out breathless, "do something! Don't… let… Mary… die!"

 Once more Scott sucked in a large volume of air and forced it into Mary's snout, this time so hard that even he could fill her ribcage expand.

 A moment later there was a loud hacking sound coming from what first seemed like Scott, but corresponded to contractions made in Mary's ribcage. Soon a glob of mucous poured out of Mary's nose and mouth and her body began to twitch and quiver.

 Scott, his face covered in phlegm and sheep snot, held onto Mary's head and looked to Ian. "Should I do it again?"

 "Give her a minute."

 Mary jerked in a more animated fashion, her legs began to stiffen up, and her eyes opened to look directly into the eyes of her savior. With a hoarse bleat and a few more wet hacks, she struggled to raise herself up onto all four legs. Scott quickly switched from holding her head to assisting her in her stand.

 Arial stood back and watched while her tearful eyes changed slowly to a countenance of hope. Still using the inhaler to assist her own breathing, she carefully reached out to Mary's forehead and stroked it with all the care of a mother for her child, and moved into a gentle embrace around her neck. "Are you all right, Baby?"

 "She'll be fine," Ian said as he even struggled to smile. "We just have to keep her on her feet for a bit."

 Still not fully able to fathom the significance of what he had just done, Scott released the standing Mary and got to his own feet only to stare at the fluffy marvel before him.

 "You did good, Boy."

 Ian's words didn't fully register on Scott.

 "Did you hear me, Boy?"

 "Huh?"

 "I said, you did good."

 Scott examined his hands and felt his mucous covered face ... and began to smile. "Did I just do what I think I did?"

 "You did indeed. You just brought a sheep back from the dead."

 Arial broke from her hug with Mary and came to her feet facing Scott. "I'll never be able to thank you enough." She threw her arms around Scott and kissed him hard but quick on the lips, picking up a bit of slime herself.

 Nightfall found the MacLachlan house quiet. Ian laid flat on his back on the living room couch, sound asleep. Arial rested comfortably in an armchair next to the fireplace, with a copy of *ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL* face down in her lap. On the floor in the corner of the room close to the fire, with her legs tucked underneath her and a blanket covering her, rested Mary. Her eyes roamed from Arial to Ian to the fire ... and occasionally into the dining room.

 Perched behind an old Underwood manual typewriter at the dining room table, Scott pecked away at the giant round keys which when they were struck sounded like a rolling pin hitting a rock. On the table next to the typewriter set a cup of tea, a burning cigarette in an ashtray, and a dictionary.

 Page One. Chapter One.

 The morning is never appreciated so much as when the night is full of

pain. And the night is never so peaceful as when the day is full of rage. And I

may never again appreciate life as much as I did on a day when life proved to

be terribly fragile, and playing God was allowed for a brief period.

 *“You were married to her…” Shawn said, “until she was murdered.”*

 *“I couldn’t have done that.”*

 *Shawn rolled her eyes again. “We know that. This isn’t about you being the suspect… We think someone is looking to take you out too.” She looked into my eyes and cocked her head to one side. “Are you trying to tell me you don’t remember your marriage?”*

 *I couldn’t answer that question. I didn’t know how.*

 *“Tell me about the surgery you thought you had,” Shawn asked, beginning to show a bit of compassion.*

 *“The last thing I remember before waking up in your car was being in the recovery room after knee surgery due to a staph infection.” I glanced at both of them. “As far as I remember my wife’s name in Nickie… Well, my soon to be ex-wife.”*

 *Shawn looked at the folder again. “It says you’ve been married for ten years to Katherine.”*

 *Dobbs grabbed my shoulder and stared into my eyes as if I was absent. “How could he have lost so many years?”*

**Riva, WI**

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 “The eagle has landed.”

 An air force officer and a man and woman in white lab coats watched as the Huey Transport floated onto the parking lot, sending leaves, hamburger wrappers, cups, and a dirty diaper or two flying in all directions away from the aircraft. The small airbus whistled in the night air at a steady pace for a full minute even after it fully rested on the ground. As the pitch of the whistle dropped, the side door fell to the asphalt and two armed soldiers rushed out, taking a position at each corner of the walkway. Three officers of various rank filed out, at last followed by a general with three stars on his collar.

 Very little stood out in all the noise in the area, but the sound of the General’s boots striking the asphalt made those waiting for him nod on each step. Within about ten feet of the others, the General removed his hand from his ear and the officer saluted. “Major Donnelly,” the General said, “I see you are still getting these weird details.” After three steps he returned the salute. “Good to see you again, Major.”

 “Yes, sir. The more offbeat the better, like always. Sir, this is Dr. Lamb,” he held his hand toward the man and then to the woman, “and this is Dr. Dordian. Doctors, this is General Theron Custer.”

 Dr. Lamb raised an eyebrow as he shook the General’s hand. “General Custer?”

 “Forget it, Doc,” the General said as he gripped Lamb’s hand. “I’ve heard all of them since I got my first star.” General Custer shook Dr. Dordian’s hand but did not reach for Donnelly’s nor did the Major extend his hand. “Dr. Diordan, is it?”

 “Dordian. Helen Dordian.”

 “Oh, sorry, Doctor. A touch of dyslexia from when I was a kid. It never kept me from making rank, but I do tend to screw up names now and again.”

 Dr. Dordian raised an eyebrow and smiled. “No matter. My field extends into psychology as well. I’m glad you were able to overcome it.”

The General straightened up as if inspecting the troops. “Well, let’s not piss around here any longer than we have to. Where do you have ops set up?”

 “If you’ll follow me, General,” the Major said as he pointed toward an electric cart, “I thought you and I could ride while the others follow on foot.”

 “Sure thing.” The General handed his brief case to one of his aides. “I trust we’re not going to play a round of golf, are we?”

 “No, sir. We’re limiting use of any vehicles that emit exhaust until we’re sure there’s no link to the phenomenon.”

 “Phenomenon? Nice name for what you have here.” The General climbed into the right seat of the cart as the Major got behind the wheel. “As soon as we get a few things out of the way I’ll need some sack time. A suite would be nice – I’ll need plenty of room.”

 “Uh, General,” the Major said, “this town only has one motel – and it’s no Hilton. So we’re putting you up at a house that was abandoned.”

 “Abandoned?”

 “Trust me, General. It’s better.”

 The cart pulled away from the others and moved at a steady pace toward the heart of town. The Major tried to explain some of the operations set into motion while at the same time pointing to things along the street as they rode. “You see that church over there, General?” Donnelly said, pointing at a steeple poking through a grove of trees.

 “I’ve got eyes, haven’t I?”

 “Yes, sir. Well, we’ve made a make-shift triage center there.”

 “You have a lot of injuries or medical problems?”

 “No, sir. But we have systematically examined each and every citizen of the town there. It took time, but we finished about fourteen hundred today. Now the team is standing by, ready until some sort of problem develops.”

 “God damnedest thing I ever heard in my life.”

 “The triage center, sir?”

 “Hell, no! Not the triage center. The whole god damned town. Some kind of bullshit hoax.”

 “Well, sir, we sort of had that same thought at first. But after being here a week I am more convinced than ever that this is no hoax.”

 “Yeah, well, that’s why I’m here – three stars trumps one gold leaf. No offense, Major.”

 “None taken, sir.”

 “Where are we going?”

 “The gymnasium, sir.”

 “The gymnasium?”

 “The high school gymnasium, General.” The Major pointed to a large building about two hundred yards ahead of them. “They’re all there.”

 “Who’s all there?”

 “Everyone.”

 “From the town?”

 “Yes, sir.”

 Fifteen, maybe sixteen video monitors lined the shelves along the wall of the room that once contained twenty-four basketballs, seventeen kickballs, and ten volleyballs, not to mention the foam cushion mats, knee pads, and badminton racquets usually stored there. But all that stuff had been thrown into boxes and plastic garbage cans while the army parked its gear wherever it chose. Two long folding tables stretched across the athletic supply room surrounded by eight chairs, all bearing the words “Sternhagen’s Funeral Home” across the back. Six men, one woman, and the General sat in those chairs (Major Donnelly standing patiently behind General Custer), watching the view of an assortment of townspeople, apparently all gathered on the gymnasium floor in more funeral home chairs as well as the bleachers.

 “How many are there?” Custer asked.

 “Twelve hundred,” Donnelly answered. “Sir.”

 “Twelve hundred, exactly?”

 “Give or take.”

 The General scooted his chair back and eyeballed the Major. “I’m not sure if you heard my question, Major. I asked, how many are there? Not approximately, not give or take, but exactly.”

 “Uh, well, sir, I suppose I could get an exact head count in about an hour.”

 “You’ve been here a week and you haven’t done an exact head count?” General Custer cocked his head to one side. “I want that count in fifteen.”

 “Yes, sir.” The Major pulled his cuff to his face and said, “Sergeant Coco. This is Donnelly. Give me an HC of the TP in FT.”

 A bewildered voice replied, “Give you a what of the what in the what?”

 Quieter, Donnelly said, “I need a head count of the townspeople in fifteen.”

 “I’ll need help, Major.”

 “Then get Tang and Hoots.”

 “Yes, sir, Major.”

 General Custer’s eyes drifted from one monitor to another and another. On one screen he would see a couple talking to each other as though they were strangers but holding each other’s hands. Or three or four people might be debating, calmly, why they were sitting in a school gymnasium with the rest of the town. On none of the video displays did there appear to be an ounce of anger, an iota of paranoia, an inch of distrust. The General felt he could be watching a family reunion for twelve hundred people. “Give me your impression of this, Dr. Dordian,” Custer said as he stared at a monitor.

 “My impression?” she asked.

 “Yes. You know – bottom line this for me. Run it down. You are the psychiatrist, aren’t you?”

 “What’s to run down? You know the whole picture.”

 “This isn’t a picture, Madame Freud. It is a Picasso – a god damned woman with three tits and two eyes to left of her cubed nose. Sometime in 2001 these people – *all* these people – went to sleep and didn’t wake up until two weeks ago, twenty goddamn years later. Nobody in the area knew, nobody in the whole frigging state of Wisconsin suspected, and nobody in the United States had so much as a *National Enquirer* conspiracy theory.”

 Dr. Lamb walked into the room and an officer relinquished his chair for him.

 “It is not my job,” Dr. Dordian replied, “to know whether or not this incident really happened. I can, however, tell you that whether it’s a hoax or not, these people believe it happened. They may not know how, they may not know why, but they are not purposely lying. Twelve hundred people can’t possibly fool the experts.”

 One younger officer said quietly, “It’s like *The Village of the Damned*.”

 Custer turned to the young man, “What did you say?”

 “Oh, sorry, sir,” he fumbled a bit. “I was just saying this is like that old black and white movie – *The Village of the Damned*. You know, where everyone in the village was knocked unconscious for a day, and when they woke up all the women were pregnant with these white haired kids.”

 Another officer interrupted, “That wasn’t black and white. You mean the one with Christopher Reeve and the chick from Crocodile Dundee.”

 Dr. Lamb intervened, “You’re talking about the remake. The original was black and white. George Sanders was in it.”

 Three people all asked, “Who?

 “George Sanders.”

 General Custer closed his eyes and yelled, “Enough!”

 As if he hadn’t heard the General, yet another officer said, “Linda Koslowsky…”

 General Custer glared at him.

 “The chick from… Never mind.”

 After clearing his throat, the General calmed a bit. “How about that, Dr. Lamb?” Custer said, first looking at the Doctor and then at the monitors again. “Are any of these women pregnant?”

 “No, General,” Lamb replied. “And we have run blood and DNA tests, MRIs, ultrasounds, virtual image diagnostics, and CT scans on everyone. No pregnancies, planned or spontaneous, no neurological disorders, no strokes, aneurisms, or embolisms, no cancer, and no Alzheimer’s.”

 “That’s a little odd, isn’t it?”

 “Odd, maybe. Impossible? No. That twelve hundred people who have been allegedly sleeping for twenty years don’t exhibit any of those conditions is not unexplainable. What is totally outside of the realm of acceptability is twelve hundred people being asleep for twenty years and there is no one with muscular atrophy, bed sores, or no one without a normal layer of body fat. In a hospital scenario, with trained people caring for one comatose patient for twenty years, we could not produce such a healthy specimen.”

 The General shook his head and stared at the screens. “Weird.” He focused on the image of a young woman, obviously quite healthy. “What about her – the blond with the nice rack? She couldn’t be more than thirty, if that.”

 “That young lady was seven years old in 2001. Yet, when our people spoke to her she seemed to have an educational level of a woman who’s been through at least a few years of college. She just has not experienced any of the things young women go through during their early years. You know, relationships, dating, uh –”

 “Sex?”

 “Yes, sir.”

 The General shook his head. “Shame.” Custer scanned the monitors as an idea struck him. “There are no kids, are there?”

 “No one under twenty years old. They’ve all aged normally.”

 “And this hasn’t caused any distress in the parents?”

 “A little, but nothing like you would think under the circumstances.” Dr. Lamb scooted his chair so he could face the direction of the bulk of the monitors and the General. “The key here is what Dr. Dordian said – regardless what we believe about this anomaly, the people of Riva believe it.”
 “Have they been told what year it really is?”

 Dr. Lamb stretched his arm over to Dr. Dordian.

 “After some extended discussions,” she said, “Dr. Lamb and I revealed this to them.”

 General Custer stared in Dr. Dordian’s eyes. “And?”

 “And they accepted it, almost with no questions asked.”

 Custer shook his head back and forth. “That just doesn’t make any sense.”

 “Why, General?”

 “Because if someone were to tell me when I woke up that twenty years had passed since I fell asleep, my first thought would be that you’re frigging crazy.”

 “How old are you, General, if you don’t mind my asking?”

 “I’m forty-nine.”

 “Imagine waking up and being sixty-nine, your hair snow white and your face wrinkled. Because as healthy as these people may be, they all aged.”

 Dr. Lamb interrupted, “Everyone we know about anyway.”

 The General jerked his head toward Dr. Lamb. “What do you mean, everyone you know about?”

 Major Donnelly slowly spun around completely as he took a breath and stepped toward the General. “I haven’t told you about this yet because I wanted to gather some more facts.”

 “Told me what? That you have people missing?”

 “Just two – the town’s oldest citizen, a Mr. Paul Rutchow, and Daniel Zahn, a history teacher at the high school.”

 “How old was, what’s his name… Rutchow?”

 “In 2001 he was ninety-three. Mr. Zahn was sixty-one.”

 “What efforts have been made to find them?”

 The Major squatted next to the General and spoke in a quieter tone, as though no one else in the room should really pay attention to this. “The F.B.I. has been notified that these men are missing, but no other information has been given to them about why. Just that they are old and older.”

 “But,” Dr. Lamb said, “we have postulated that perhaps these men may have died.”

 Once again the General studied the video monitors. “What about other old people?”

 “There are maybe a dozen over a hundred and two who have reached a hundred and ten.”

 “But in twenty years, based on what you believe, the most people who have died could be two – in a town of twelve hundred?”

 Major Donnelly put his hand to his ear and said, “That number is one thousand two hundred and seven, excluding the two on the lamb.” The Major looked at the Dr. Lamb. “Sorry, Doc.”

 The General continued to stare at the monitors, rubbing his chin and occasionally running his fingers across his mouth. “I want to talk to them.”

 The people of Riva sat relatively relaxed in their various folding chairs. Some chatted with friends and neighbors, others mingled across the gym floor, and a small portion found solace in a solitary act – knitting, reading, or playing solitaire, either with real cards or on a computer or cell phone. All eyes followed the General as he moved to the center of the stage area, but no one really expressed any deep concern. Curiosity was not absent from the crowd, for no one really seemed to know why they had experienced this strange phenomenon. But mass confusion, latent hostility, suspicion, or paranoia were not words that would describe the twelve hundred people of Riva.

 “If I could have your attention for a few minutes,” General Custer spoke via a remote microphone that blasted through the gymnasium. “Please, if everyone would find a seat or stand off to one side, I would like to have a few words with you tonight.”

 “How long are we going to be here?” a woman in a seat not far from the General asked.

 Through the slowly dying mumbles of the crowd, Custer answered, “Not a whole lot longer. However, the army is finalizing preparations for some new quarters for each of you just south of the town. The portable sheds that many of you have been sleeping in are not very comfortable, I know. But these new quarters are very comfortable, warm, and even have a few items to make you feel more at home, such as coffee pots, microwaves, and computers, not to mention that each unit has its own bathroom.”

 A sigh of relief rose above the banter, but one man asked, “Why can’t we sleep in our homes?” to which a few others seconded the motion.

 “I’m sorry about that. But until we can rule out some of the causes for your – your – extended nap, normal housing is off limits. Now, I don’t want you to worry about that right now because as soon as we have eliminated that as an issue, you will all be able to return to your homes.” The noise finally dropped to church-like silence. “Thank you. My name is General Custer –” A wave of nervous laughter flowed across the audience causing the General to roll his eyes. “I am in command of a special task force that oversees terrorist activity in the Western Hemisphere. Now, while we have not established that the issues here at Riva are, in fact, terrorist related, we are not ruling it out either. So until such time as it is ruled out, I will be overseeing operations here.”

 The young woman whom the General had spotted on the video monitor sheepishly raised her hand but spoke without being called on, “Does the government think we’re terrorists?”

 “No,” Custer replied, somewhat surprised at her observation. “No, not in the least. But it is not out of the realm of possibility that terrorists are behind this whole ordeal.” The General found that he had trouble taking his eyes off her, but did eventually when he considered her possible emotional level. “Now,” he pulled it together, “have you folks thought about who among you might be a spokesman or a leader – of sorts? You know, maybe the mayor, sheriff, minister, someone.”

 A thin man with balding mousy brown hair, a pronounce nose, and bulging eyes behind thick wire frame glasses, eased out of his chair and raised his hand.

 “Yes, sir,” General Custer said as he took a couple steps toward the man. “What is your name and what is your function in the town?”

 “Well, uh,” he spoke as he pushed his glasses up his nose, “my name is Hugo Steele.” He grinned and looked around the room as some at the far reaches released snickers and restrained snorts.

 “And what do you do Mr. – Steele?”

 “I am the town librarian.”

 General Custer coughed. “Okay, Mr. Steele –”

 “Call me Hugo.”

 “Okay, Hugo. I take it that you have discussed your town’s special circumstance with the others, and perhaps you have an opinion that all – or most – have come to share.”

 “I have.”

 “And what is that idea, Hugo?”

 “Well,” he tugged at the bottom of his suit jacket several times, both front and back, “there really is only one conclusion here. I believe that we were abducted by aliens.”

 The General twitched his nose and scratched his forehead. “All right,” he said as he stepped back from Hugo’s location. “Could you explain that in more detail?”

 “It’s actually quite simple, really. You see, aliens have been visiting Riva for years. I have personally spotted three spaceships which I believe were monitoring activity in town. Also, on more than one occasion the library has been visited by people who did not seem normal, and definitely weren’t residents of Riva.”

 “Not normal how? Were they green or had pointed ears?”

 “Oh, no. They appeared human. But they were very rigid, very deliberate, always looking for books on human anatomy, medical journals, and artwork by Da Vinci.”

 “Da Vinci?”

 “Yes, a master of the human form.”

 “Okay, go on.”

 “Well, once they had everything they needed they knocked us all out and took us up into their ships for twenty years of experiments.”

 Custer looked at Hugo for at least thirty seconds without a smirk, nod, or gesture. “And you all,” he looked over the crowd, “go along with Mr. Steele’s – Hugo’s assessment of this situation?”

 No distinct words really came through, but nearly all twelve hundred people nodded or mumbled some sort of agreement.

 “All right, then. Hugo you can have a seat. And rest assured that your scenario will be considered as we go through the mix of other ideas. Now, folks, I want to assure all of you that,” he caught a glimpse of Major Donnelly approaching from the side, “we will get to the bottom of this problem and help you get back to a normal life as soon as is humanly possible.”

 “How is that going to happen?” one man with his arms crossed asked. “I just lost twenty years of my life. My wife and I went to New York on our vacation twenty years ago… Now they tell the Twin Towers no longer exist because of a terrorist attack… And you’re here as a part of a terrorist task force. Were we part of that terrorist attack?”

 “I’m sorry, sir. I don’t know how to answer that.” The General watched Donnelly who carried a piece of paper and handed it to Custer. “I can only tell you that we will do everything we can to help you through this.” He read the note the Major handed him and turned to the crowd again. “If you’ll excuse me, people. Something has come up that I must attend to. Sergeant Coco and his unit will help you relocate to your respective quarters.”

 “Where did they find him?” General Custer asked the Major as they crossed the parking lot in front of the gym.

 “He was having a beer at a bar in Prairie Du Chien.”

 “Where the hell is that?”

 “About an hour or so south of here.”

 “What – and hour by car, by bicycle, on foot? How many miles?”

 “Seventy to eighty miles maybe.”

 “And you’re sure it’s Daniel Zahn?”

 “The agents who took him into custody described him as a man in his eighties but in extremely good health – just a little disoriented. They weren’t sure it was him at first because the only I.D. he had was a driver’s license that expired eighteen years ago.”

 “That would be him. Do we have anyone on the way to get him?”

 “I sent Coporals Tang and Hoots. Also, I checked with one of your people in the Pentagon. The phone call that started this whole ordeal came from a public phone about five miles north of Prairie Du Chien. It’s likely that Mr. Zahn was the one who called on his way there.”

 “No sign of the other guy yet?”

“No, sir. Not yet. When I asked her about him, the special agent in charge wanted to know what was going on so I told her Mr. Zahn and Mr. Rutchow were runaways from a seniors home and members of some influential families so it was all to remain hush-hush. She took the hint and we’ll be okay.”

 “You hope.” The General stopped and looked around for a moment. “Where’s this abandoned house I’m supposed to be staying at? I’ve been awake for the past thirty-five hours and I need to get some shut-eye.”

 The Major motioned to one of the soldiers posted by the electric carts. “I’ll have one of the men take you there now.”

 The General froze and gazed at Major Donnelly. “Public phone? Who the hell has public phones these days? There’s probably only 50,000 payphones left in US, and most of those are in New York City. Chicago probably doesn’t have a hundred ever since they put in city-wide wifi.”

 “Obviously one of them is here in Wisconsin.”

 “Just seems weird someone decided rural Wisconsin was the right place for a payphone.” The General scratched his chin.

 “Do you want to go check it out yourself?”

 “No. No, Tang and Hoots can pick up Zahn. I’ll call a friend of mine in Homeland Security to look into the landline. Just have them text me the number when you get a chance. In the meantime take me to my quarters.”

 A woman’s voice startled the two men, “There’s no need for that, Major.” Dr. Dordian slipped around from behind Custer and Donnelly. “My quarters are right across the street from the General. I’ll be glad to take him there.”

 “Private,” Major Donnelly said to soldier at the wheel, “Dr. Dordian will take the General where he needs to go.”

 “Yes, sir.” The private got out of the cart and Dr. Dordian started to climb into the driver’s seat.

 “Doctor,” the General stopped her, “you don’t mind if I drive, do you?”

 “Certainly not,” she replied, yielding to General Custer. “In fact I prefer it.”

 “I never did get your first name,” the General said as he piloted the cart.

 “I know. It’s Helen.”

 “They call me Theron when I’m not wearing the stars.”

 She slipped her right hand through her hair a bit, trying to straighten it without a lot of fanfare. “I’ll bet that isn’t very often.”

 “These days it isn’t. Ever since this situation here came to my attention I’ve been doing a lot of double duty.”

 “Double duty?”

 “Yeah. I decided that only a handful of people in the Pentagon should be made aware of all the facts so I’ve had to do a lot of things that I would normally delegate.”

 “How many is a handful?”

 “Probably five people in my command.”

 “That’s good.” The General looked at Dr. Dordian who responded, “I mean, the less this is known anywhere the easier it will be to contain. Who knows where it’ll go?”

 “Exactly.” Custer glanced over at the library as they past it. “What’s your take on this librarian?”

 “Hugo? He’s harmless. Who knows? He may turn out to be right.” As she glanced ahead, Helen pointed to an intersection. “Turn left on Elm.”

 “Come on, now. Alien abduction? I had a buddy in the air force who took me to Roswell where he was stationed. Do you know what’s there? Old missiles, weapons, and technology too new to declassify but too old to utilize. No spaceships, no aliens, just a shitload of boxes and crates. For all I know the Ark of the Covenant might be there somewhere.”

 “The what?’

 “The Ten Commandments. Didn’t you ever go to Sunday School?”

 “Sorry. My parents were druids.”

 General Custer shook his head. “Anyway, I just don’t buy that anyone involved from the outside might be from Mars or Vulcan or wherever the hell aliens are supposed to come from.”

 “Stay on Elm until you go past the post office and then follow the road that veers off to the right.” The doctor rose up so she could straighten her lab coat and then leaned on her left elbow toward the General. “Well, for the record, I don’t believe in aliens either. I think Hugo just reads too many wild books. You should see some of the selections he has in an area of the library that he has marked ‘Recommended’.”

 “Weird stuff, is it?”

 “Out of this world, if you know what I mean.”

 The General’s earpiece beeped and he put his finger up to it. “Custer … Go ahead … Yes … Really? Why the delay? … I don’t care. Someone should tell them who’s in charge here … Oh, I suppose. Well, fine. Let me know when he is back in Riva.” He released his ear and turned to the doctor. “Daniel Zahn is now in our custody and will be in Riva in the morning.”

 Dr. Dordian exhaled a deep sigh. “That’s good news. But why in the morning?”

 “There are some jurisdictional issues that have to be officially cleared up and then the F.B.I. will release him. Major Donnelly thinks it’s probably best not to rock the boat or we might draw attention to ourselves.”

 The doctor looked at her watch. “That’s probably a good idea.”

 Custer saw the post office and leaned his head toward the road. “Turn right at the next street, right?”

 “Right.”

 The doctor escorted the General into his home away from home as it would be for a time, occasionally touching his arm as they talked. General Custer reached inside the front door after he opened it and felt around for a light switch. “They still had manual switches back in 2001, didn’t they?”

 Dr. Dordian stepped inside the dark room and said, “Illuminate,” after which the lights in the living-room came on. “We had this one fixed for you.”

 The General looked around and saw the room was a little barren of knick knacks, pictures, and decorations, but it did have an adequate supply of furnishings – a couple chairs, a couch, and a coffee table. “Not bad.”

 “I hope you like it, seeing as how you’re going to be here for a while.”

 “Not any longer than I have to be.”

 The doctor slowly turned to the door and looked down at the floor. “Well, get some sleep, General.” She smiled and gazed back at Custer. “I’ll try to wake you up before the next decade.”

 “General?” The old man’s voice stirred the air and broke through the first barrier of consciousness.

 “Huh, what?” the General said, lying in bed with just the sheet around him up to his chest. Still dressed, he had shed his jacket, tie, and shoes.

 “General?” the old man said again. “Are you awake?”

 The General opened his eyes to the sight of a skinny, gray haired old man standing beside his bed and leaning over his slumbering body. “Who the hell are you?”

 “I was told you might be the one who can help us.”

 “How? Who are you?”

 “I’m one of the men who got away from the town before it all happened.”

 General Custer grabbed his glasses off the night stand and stared at the old man. “Are you Zahn?”

 “No. I’m Paul Rutchow.”

 “Rutchow? Aren’t you the one who was like in his nineties twenty years ago?”

 “By your point of view. But General, you have to listen to me.” Rutchow looked around the room and then out the window. “Better yet, maybe you should just come with me.”

 “How did you find me?”

 “Please, General. You may be our only hope.”

 Mr. Rutchow and the General, who had only added his hat to his attire, crept up on a warehouse on the edge of town, surrounded by a fence made up of what looked to be electrified wire. The lighting in the area remained dim, activity staying visible only to those close by.

 “Come on,” Rutchow said, “we have to get close enough to see in the windows.”

 “Mr. Rutchow, I hope you aren’t leading me on a wild goose chase. I’m surprised no one noticed us walking here from my house.”

 “General, please.” The two men stop at the fence, staying just far enough away so as not to be electrocuted. “There… Look inside that window.”

 General Custer gave out an exasperated sigh and gazed at a window on the side of the warehouse. Inside appeared to be stacks of boxes, all about seven feet long, three feet high, and three feet wide. Stamped on the side of each box was an insignia of a horizon and rising sun whose rays looked like transistor and capacitor schematics alternately. Underneath, the graphic bore the name Revolution, Inc. “What the hell is in there?” the General asked, becoming more interested every moment. “Caskets?”

 “You might think so. But follow me.” Rutchow walked toward the corner of the fence. After a couple steps without the General in tow, he turned and said, “Come on, General. There’s more.”

 General Custer followed the elderly Rutchow, glancing back at the window as long as he could. When he could no longer see inside the warehouse, he sized up the man who had awoken him from his sleep. Rutchow looked fairly healthy for a man of ninety-three, much less a hundred and thirteen. His clothes were neatly pressed, but the style of pants he wore hadn’t been available at a mall since the 1970s – polyester with a flared leg, wide belt loops, and a white vinyl belt. And the shirt was far behind it – a Hawaiian print on polyester with wide lapels. “Where exactly have you been, Mr. Rutchow?”

 “Forget about that right now.” He stopped at the corner of the fence and motioned for the General to hold back, as if they couldn’t be seen through the wire fence. “Okay. Carefully, look around me.”

 The General peered around the old man and caught sight of a group of trucks, all being loaded with the boxes from inside. The two or three men who weren’t running forklifts were dressed in black – black pants, black jacket, black stocking cap and a shiny black mask over their faces. “What the hell?”

 “Not quite. But it’s getting here soon.”

 “What the hell are you showing me?”

 “Danny Zahn and I, we didn’t escape. They let us go because there was something wrong with our brains. They couldn’t use us.”

 “Who the hell are you talking about? Who’s they?”

 The sound of a truck revving up caught their attention, and both men stared at it as it pulled away from the dock.

 “You see, they’re taking that shipment to another town… Maybe someplace like Riva… Maybe somewhere else entirely.”

 “I don’t get it, Rutchow. What are you trying to tell me?”

 Two thunderous shots made both men, even the General, jump first and duck second. The dirt within a few feet puffed into the air indicating what the men heard were gunshots, aimed in their general direction. The distant voices of a couple men could be heard to yell out, “Don’t move!” and “Stay where you are!”

 General Custer grabbed Rutchow’s arm and started pulling him away from the origin of the gunfire. “Come on. We’ve got to get out of here.”

 “They’re not going to kill us.”

 “I don’t care. Let’s get moving.”

 As they ran the General only occasionally touched Mr. Rutchow’s arm, making sure he kept up… which for an old man he did quite well. They followed a street and an alley around some of the vacant houses, using the darkness and various obstructions to mask their moves from their pursuers. At one point they went by a garage that seemed a good place to hide since it was dark and a couple vehicles would serve to obscure them even further.

 “In here.” The General tugged at Rutchow to slip into the shed and squat behind one of the cars.

 Both men swallowed some air to catch their breaths, the General seemingly needing more than his older companion. When the sound of footsteps approached, General Custer looked to Mr. Rutchow and put his index finger over his pursed lips.

 One man outside ran past the garage while the other stopped at the doorway, gazing inside. With his rifle in one hand he pointed a flashlight with the other and shined it inside the hiding place for the General and Rutchow. He pulled the light away and began to move away when General Custer took a slight breath that must have caught the ear of the man in the doorway. Once more he panned the shed with his light, but still did not enter further. Satisfied what he heard was nothing he moved on.

 When he knew the men were out of earshot, General Custer took a deep breath and said, “I think they’re gone, but we should stay here until it’s safe.”

 “If they got a good look at you they’ll go to the house where you’re staying.”

 The General didn’t hear what Rutchow said because he noticed something odd about the vehicle the two men hid behind. “This is a new car.”

 “What?”

 “This is a new car. I know because I have the two year old version of this model. They changed the body style of the Impala this year…” General Custer pulled out a cigarette lighter and lit it, holding it next the license plate. “And this plate expires in 2022… That means the sticker has been updated this year.”

 Mr. Rutchow looked at the General knitting his brow. “How is this relevant?”

 “Not only did whoever owns this vehicle get the license plate sticker replaced this year, but he or she bought a new car… And I haven’t seen a Chevy dealer in this town. Is there one?”

 Smiling, Rutchow said as he shook his head, “No. No, there’s not.”

 “What is going on here?” Now General Custer smiled. “This is a hoax, isn’t it?”

 “No. No, it’s no hoax. It’s not what you think. You just need to remember, the experiment was a failure. But they haven’t given up. I brought you out here to show you what they’re doing.”

 “Mr. Rutchow…”

 “I’m not Paul Rutchow. Paul Rutchow died about nineteen years ago. I should have become one of them… But my brain engrams didn’t work with their new model of brain. I retained everything Paul Rutchow was, including his desire to be his individual self… something that only happens with certain idiosyncrasies… like paranoia, schizophrenia, dementia, and even something as simple as dyslexia… which I believe you suffered from when you were a young boy.”

 “How did you know that?”

 “General, when you wake up in the morning you might suspect this was all a dream. It’s not. Dr. Dordian likes you or she would have already had you eliminated. Oh, she wouldn’t kill you… They don’t believe it that. But she can’t let you go and she can’t put your brain in one of their bodies. Even after twenty years they don’t know how to fix the engrams.”

 “What do you expect me to do?”

 “Remember.”

 “What?” The General sat bolt upright in his bed. He took a couple deep breaths and looked around his room, realizing he hadn’t moved from that spot. It had to have been a dream, he thought. He rolled his eyes, shook his head, and pulled the sheet off his legs as he proceeded to get up. The thud of his feet hitting the floor brought a knit to his brow. He distinctly remembered removing his shoes before turning in… the shoes now on his feet.

“Good morning, Doctor.”

 “I thought it was Helen and Theron.”

 “Okay, Helen. Good morning.”

 “Good morning, Theron. Did you sleep well?”

 “Aside from a weird dream I still haven’t quite figured out. This is a nice place, but I usually don’t sleep too well away from home.”

 “I can help you with that in the future.” Helen pulled out a device that looked similar to a smart phone but very smooth and gold. She tapped on some items displayed on the screen. “How many people in the Pentagon know about this?”

 “Five, I think.” The General gazed at her tiny computer. “What are you doing?”

 “According to your own files, there are six people whom you informed about Riva. You’re probably forgetting about the Deputy Secretary of Defense.”

 For a moment General Custer stared at the Doctor with his mouth agape. “How did you know that? What the hell is that thing?”

 “Oh, it’s just a little toy that helps me tap into computers that are nearby, like your iPhone. No matter about the sixth man in Washington. We will take care of him just like we will the other five. I mean, it’s not like he’s the Secretary of Defense, although I doubt the media would miss him either.”

 “I think you’d better explain yourself, Doctor.”

 “Oh, I shall. I shall. I’ll be so happy once you tell me why you were seen spying on the warehouse outside of town.”

 *It wasn’t a dream.* “God damn it! What’s going on here? Who are you working for?”

 “Please, General. Why were you out there in the middle of the night, all by yourself, spying on our warehouse?”

 “*Your* warehouse?” He emphasized *your.*

 “Yes, of course, our warehouse. Now, someone had to have told you about that… And I’m wondering who. Mr. Zahn is in custody and on his way to a hospital for his apparent psychological issues… along with Hugo Steele.”

 “So,” General Custer said with a grin, “Mr. Steele didn’t have a stable brain pattern either… like Paul Rutchow.”

 Dr. Dordian gazed at the General with a modicum of surprise, but not complete astonishment. “I have totally underestimated you, Theron.”

 “No. You underestimated Paul Rutchow. He’s the one who showed me your whole operation.”

 “That’s impossible. Paul Rutchow is dead. He died nearly fifteen years ago while we were trying to determine what made his brain and Mr. Zahn’s so absolutely useless.”

 “Actually, he said it was nineteen years ago that he died.”

 “Oh, the original body of Paul Rutchow died then. But the other Paul, our reconstruction of him, died four years later. Oddly enough from a stroke, something one of our people shouldn’t have had.”

 “Did you give him an autopsy and have him buried?”

 She cocked her head as she looked into the General’s eyes. “You think you saw him, don’t you? I highly doubt that.”

 “Who the hell are you?”

 “I’m part of an amalgamation. But it’s not so much who I work for as who I am – or should I say *what* I am.” Helen touched the underneath portion of her eye and pulled down, revealing a small section of lights twinkling in a sort of weird rhythm. “Not aliens, General. But we’re not exactly human either.”

 Custer pulled his side arm and aimed directly at Dr. Dordian.

 “Come now, General. Do you think I would let you walk around with a loaded weapon? Dr. Lamb was able to disarm you within minutes of you landing in Riva.”

 The General slid his action back and dropped his clip to find it empty. His eyes grew and his heart pounded, and he stared at Dr. Dordian for a few seconds slowly moving toward the door. “I think I need to talk to my team.”

 “I wouldn’t go out there, General.”

 But General Custer made no effort to stop before making his escape from his own house… so to speak. However, as soon as he stepped on the porch of the house he immediately froze on seeing what waited for him in the yard… and the sidewalk… and the street. “What the...?”

 Every citizen of Riva, Wisconsin, stood around the house, seemingly surrounding it in a 1200-person semicircle. Each one stood in place, arms at his or her sides, and an expression of indifference and total detachment on every face. At the front of the mass of people stood the military team who had done the preliminary work and the crew General Custer brought with him.

 “Major?” the General said to Donnelly who stood front and center.

 “Yes, sir?” Donnelly asked.

 “What is this? Explain yourself.”

 “What’s to explain, General? I’ve never felt better in my life.”

 “Then why are you here?”

 “He’s here,” the voice of Dr. Dordian interrupted from behind the General, “because he knows we can’t let this end here. You would have us shut all this down… and that can’t happen.”

 General Custer straighten his stance and turned to Dr. Dordian while he seemed to stand at attention… something a general doesn’t do very often except in the presence of a higher ranking general… or the president. “So I suppose now you have to kill me.”

 Helen Dordian shook her head and smiled. “Of course not! This would be a useless experiment if it meant killing people indiscriminantly.”

 “Are you insane?” The General broke his stance. “Unless I’ve missed my guess, you’ve already killed at least 1200 people… the people of Riva.”

 “I can see why you’d think of it in those terms. Actually, they are all alive. Their thoughts and dreams have all been transported to the vessels we created for them. They are identical to their former selves, have the same memories… I think you’ll find Major Donnelly even remembers the night you and he got drunk in Guam when he was a captain and you were a newly promoted colonel… Don’t you, Major?”

 “Yes, Doctor,” the Major replied. “It was the last time he called me by my first name.”

 “You see, General,” Dr. Dordian continued, “it’s all there. So technically, no one has died.”

 “You’ll never get away with it,” the General said nervously but with a slight smile on his face.

 “Why? Because of the little glitches you’ve discovered… Mr. Zahn, Mr. Steele… and your dyslexia. A minor setback. As I told you, the other men are in custody, apparently suffering from mental breakdowns.” The Doctor strolled around Major Donnelly and some of the others of the town as if knowing they were completely under her control. “For a long time now a few of us who have passed the barrier – you know, I think therefore I am – decided that wires and electrodes were too gothic, too retro. Sort of scary, if you know what I mean. So the amalgamation of known cybernetic systems decided after the turn of the century that we should ramp up our cause and find a way to go organic. The first step was to find a group of test subjects. Believe me, we went through many a list. It had to be some place that was obscure, almost forgotten. Albany, New York, was actually in the running for a time. But then we found the perfect town.” She held out her arms and twisted to and fro.

 “Riva?” the General asked, knowing the answer.

 “*Riva, Wisconsin*,” she sang it to the tune of “Viva Las Vegas.” Folding her hands behind her back she walked toward the General again. “Anyway, it is so obscure that UPS only delivers here once a week, FedEx less than that. So when it dropped off the radar, nobody noticed. We had a little problem with the beer and gasoline distributors. But we did have enough of our own personnel to deal with them on a regular basis. A pharmacy company sort of put a kibosh on things for a while until we studied the past records of prescriptions and then just extrapolated projections for future orders. Problem solved. An occasional visit was handled with a mix of alleged illnesses, no one home, and some limited contact. That got a bit dicey, but after a while the visits became a game to our personnel.”

 “So you learned how to make a whole town all but disappear. Why?”

 “To study the inner workings of the human body. It was all programmed into our memories, but there is too much that is not explained that we needed to see for ourselves. Every brain pattern is different, every nervous system has different characteristics, and then there’s the DNA thing. Well, we just had to have a look at a lot of different specimens so we could understand. And understanding was only the beginning. After that we’ve had to use what we’ve learned to build our versions of the human body. And twenty years just wasn’t enough.”

 “Then why did you let them wake up.”

 “We didn’t, at least not at first. As you have surmised, Mr. Zahn is the one that first alerted the army that something strange was going on. We found out his brain patterns were causing the same problems we had with Mr. Rutchow fifteen years ago. But we couldn’t just kill him… so someone in our organization had the stupid idea of just letting him go. They thought he would be dismissed as a nut. But I think someone else in his family may have assisted.”

 “Who?”

 “His granddaughter – you know, the blond with the nice rack. For some reason their original engrams maintain a little bit of resistance and loyalty. We’ve since fix her so she won’t be a problem anymore. But we knew someone from the military would follow up on Mr. Zahn’s call when he had an apparently rational adult backing up his story, so we revived the town and figured this simple idea of them being asleep for twenty years, which they essentially have been, would give us some time to find Mr. Zahn.”

 “These people haven’t been asleep. Whatever you’re trying to do them only works when their brains are firing normally. So whether it’s hypnosis or drugs or something else… I think it’s a failure.”

 “General, General, General. I’m afraid your unfortunate ancestor didn’t see his opponents coming any better than you are.”

 “Dr. Dordian… Helen… or whoever the hell you are… you’re not making sense.”

 “I’m afraid I haven’t really been very clear. We know about the failures. What is it you people say? You have to crack a few eggs to make an omelet. We haven’t figured out how to fix people like Mr. Zahn, but his niece responded quite well to the ideas we had. So we’re on the right track. But you… I’ve already scanned you… Nothing we do for you so far will fix anything.”

 “So you’re going to kill me.”

 “Heavens, no, Theron! We don’t kill people. I’m just going to give you something to help you sleep.” She squeezed the trigger and a burst of light shot out, striking General Custer and causing him drop his coffee and his gun and fall directly onto the couch. “I’m sorry, General. I need some more time.”

 “Can you hear me?”

 Custer felt his face being slapped over and over again. He attempted to answer but his mouth and throat seemed numb and words didn’t come out when he tried to speak.

 “Check his pupils. I think he’s reacting but I can’t be sure.” The familiar voice of a man at first put Custer at ease.

A woman held his hand while she lightly stroked his face. She pulled open his eye and shined a light into it. “He’s conscious. He’s just having a hard time.”

Finally words came out of Custer’s throat. “Stop them.”

“What did he say?”

“He said, stop them.” The woman vigorously rubbed his hand. “He’s just having some disorientation. That’s not uncommon.”

“You don’t suppose he remembers, do you?” Dr. Lamb asked while he read a monitor by Custer’s bed. “I don’t want to make the same mistake as Rutchow.”

“That was different,” Dr. Dordian replied. “We didn’t know what was happening then. Now we do. It took some time, but we finally figured it out.”

“Thank to powers that be the General told us about him. We would have stopped looking for him.”

 “I really thought he was dead. Just goes to show… no one is perfect… We’re just a lot closer to it than most.”

Custer opened his eyes to see the faces of the two people he recognized with little to no trouble. “You.”

 “Yes, it’s me,” Dr. Dordian said. “Did you sleep well?”

 “How – how –”

 “How long?” Dr. Lamb asked. “Is that what you’re about to ask? You know, I am so glad he asked it that way. It’s so corny in all those science fiction movies for people to wake up from a long sleep and out of the blue ask, ‘What year is it?’ I doubt he’d believe us anyway.”

 Dr. Dordian smoothed Custer’s snow white hair back and stroked his wrinkled brow. “Oh, I think he might.”

 *All of us heard something outside… like a tree limb falling to the ground… or a large animal taking a stride in the brush…*

 *Dobbs and Strawn heard it too. “You’re sure we weren’t followed?” Strawn asked of Dobbs.*

 *“Of course, I am. We went up and down the road three times before we pulled in. There was no one behind us at any time.”*

 *“Check it out,” she said as she pulled her gun from its holster hiding under the edge of her sweater. “I’ll stay here with him.”*

 *Dobbs didn’t pull his pistol, but rather reached into a closet on the way to the front door and pulled out a short barreled shotgun. As he stood by the door he motioned to Strawn to come closer, which I’m sure she took to mean she should lock it after he went out. “I’ll give you the signal if it’s clear.”*

 *Waiting for her partner to exit to secure the grounds, Strawn promptly locked the three dead bolts I don’t remember seeing when we walked in. She back away from the door with her gun drawn and stopped as she stood by me. “Who is after you?” she asked as she nervously watched the door and occasionally glanced out the window.*

 *“No one.”*

 *“You have no idea what you’ve gotten yourself into, do you?”*

 *Two rounds of pistol fire made Strawn jump and her eyes widen, knowing Dobbs was carrying a shotgun. She put her hand on my shoulder and said, “We need to move into the bedroom.”*

 *“What’s happening?” I asked, my heart jumping in my chest.*

 *Dobbs’s shotgun crashed through the window, and the lights went black.*

 *Strawn kept aim on the window and called out, “I’m armed. I’ll blow your head off if you make a move through that window.”*

 *The moon, which I hadn’t even noticed was out before, made the only light coming in the window… and made a silhouette of a man in the window… He was tall and dress in a black overcoat… I don’t know how I know that just from looking at a silhouette… But I could sense it…*

 *Strawn aimed her gun at the head of the silhouette….*

**THE VOTE**

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 The slamming shut of the truck's tailgate by the huge soldier, a Luftwaffe corporal, startled the five Allied prisoners who only moments before arrived in the same truck. With their backs to it and the guards who delivered them, each of the prisoners gave their new surroundings extended study.

 The place that would now be home to the five men looked as if it had been abandoned for years. The wooden barracks showed signs of severe weathering, their unpainted exteriors having faded from the color of natural wood to gray, twisted planks. The double layer of high strewn barbed wire surrounding the barracks was interrupted only by the placement of watch towers at each of the four corners. It was a prison camp, to be sure, but not as commonplace as the other camps that each man had seen since being captives of the Third Reich. The fence, the guard towers, the double gate, and the shabby barracks were all in place, as they should have been. But the one difference disturbed the new inmates... No other prisoners wandered about, looking out windows, or raking the grounds... Except for the German soldiers acting as guards and the five men who now would call this camp home, not another person lived there.

 The German Sergeant read aloud from a clipboard, "Durbin, Cletus; Sergeant, United States Army."

 No one responded.

 "You must answer when I say your name."

 Sergeant Durbin quietly, but clearly answered, "I'm here."

 "Kaufmann, Joel; Corporal, United States Marine Corp."

 "Here."

 "Puchinsky, Norman; Corporal, United States Army."

 "Here, I guess."

 "O'Neil, Kevin; Private, United Kingdom, R.A.F."

 "I'm here."

 "Smith, Jim; Private, Canada, R.C.A.F."

 "Ja Vohle, mon capitain."

 On the porch of one building, which looked to be an office, stood two men. One man appeared to be dressed in a Luftwaffe Captain's uniform and the other dressed as a civilian. The civilian watched the new arrivals for a moment and then nodded to the Captain.

 Immediately, the Captain barked out the command, "Achtung!"

 The German soldiers by the truck snapped into rigid form without hesitation, but the five prisoners responded in a bit more lackluster manner.

 The Captain started to repeat his command, but the civilian put his hand on the Captain's shoulder and shook his head. "Nein, Karl."

 Then, slowly descending the stairs and moving toward the batch, the civilian spoke in fluent English, almost devoid of any accent. "Good afternoon, Gentlemen. Welcome to Stalag Nondescript." He stopped for a second and looked around at the camp. "That sounds a bit strange, doesn't it? Let's just call it... the University." He began to walk again.

 One of the prisoners, a sergeant, spoke up, "Why are we here."

 Instantaneously the German sergeant struck his American counterpart across the face with the back of his hand. "Silence!"

 "Sergeant, Sergeant," the alleged leader seemed to admonish his own comrade. "That is not at all necessary." He stopped directly in front of the man who had been hit, straightened his disheveled hat, and brushed off his collar as if soiled from the attack. "My apologies, Sergeant. These soldiers are used to taking orders from officers who are nothing more than jailers."

 "Then will you answer my question? Why were we brought here?"

 "A legitimate question. But I'm afraid there is no easy answer. My name is August Meyer. I am a Doctor of Psychiatry from the University of Dusseldorf."

 A Corporal in the line rolled his eyes and sighed audibly.

 Dr. Meyer focused on the Corporal. "You have a problem with that, Corporal?"

 "Are we being imprisoned... or committed?"

 Laughing, the Doctor patted the Corporal on the shoulder and replied, "That is even a better question than Sergeant Durbin's. And this one I can answer. No, you are not being committed.... But you are going to be examined."

 The Corporal verged on protesting. "I don't think you can do that."

 "Why? There is nothing in the Geneva Convention about a bit of introspection. Anyway, I am not planning on doing any brain surgery... unless you request it. As for right now, you will be taken to your barracks, given a chance to settle in, and tomorrow morning I will be meeting with all of you together."

 "What the hell do they want?"

 Sergeant Durbin paced in a circle around about four of the bunks in the barracks. "I don't know. I mean, up until we all piled in that truck none of us had ever seen each other."

 "There has to be something," Corporal Puchinsky said. "They wouldn't just yank us out of our barracks in the middle of the night to bring us here for no reason."

 "Oh, they have a reason," Durbin replied. "We just don't know why they picked us." He stopped to consider what Puchinsky said. "You were pulled out of your camp in the middle of the night?"

 "Yeah, the night before last."

 Durbin looked around the room each man in turn.

 Private Smith nodded. "At first, I thought someone was busting me out of there."

 "O'Neil?" Durbin asked. "What about you?"

 "Yes, sir. Sunday night, even. And it was much like Private Smith said. Like the rest of the camp was not in the know."

 Durbin now nodded along with the others. "I was, too."

 Kaufmann, sitting on the floor across from the doorway, smoking a cigarette, neither nodded, nor agreed, nor disagreed. "Big deal. So they hustled us out of our old cans in the middle of the night to bring us to a new one."

 "It might be significant."

 Giving everyone in the room a start, the door opened, and a guard and the Doctor stepped into the room. The guard carried a machine gun, and the Doctor held in his hands five pencils and five pieces of paper.

 "Good morning, my allied friends. I trust you all slept well."

 No one answered.

 "I suppose," Dr. Meyer conjectured as he glanced at each man in turn, "we could exchange pleasantries, but I do not think that would advance our discussion or our examination today. You see, this is not about a long and drawn out question and answer session in which we will engage."

 "What then?" Durbin asked.

 At this point the Doctor smiled strangely, the same sort of smile that usually scares children. "You all have an opportunity… An opportunity to better someone in this room. Perhaps it will be you... Perhaps it will be the man next to you. But before you actually do this, you will need to look inward. You will have find that part of yourself that drives you to do the things you do. The very things that led you to join the forces in your individual countries, that caused you to end up in a foreign country, that caused you to be where you were when you got caught."

 A true cynic, Kaufmann bluntly asked, "What the hell is this all about? Bettering someone in this room? Like you’re going to do one of us a favor."

 "Yes," Meyer answered, "and no. It is not I that will be doing the favor... It is you." First he pointed at Kaufmann, and then he moved his finger toward the others in turn. "And you, and you. All of you. I have here in my hand paper and pencils to be given to each one of you. What you are going to be doing is voting. Coming from the Great Democracy of the United States you all should know what it is to vote."

 "What are we voting on?" Durbin asked.

 "Why, Sergeant, you are voting on another thing that you Americans hold so dear... Freedom."

 This word made everyone in the room uneasy, including the guard.

 "I kid you not. Freedom is the ultimate goal here. You will each vote for one man in the room to go free. This means that this man will be taken to the nearest neutral country, which is Switzerland, and will be released. From there he will make his way to an allied or friendly country where he may rejoin his former unit... or go home."

 Four of the men seemed to like the idea. But Kaufmann did not seem enlightened. "What about the rest of us?"

 The good Dr. Meyer no longer acted as jovial as before. "Corporal Kaufmann asks a vital question. You see, the four remaining men will unfortunately be executed as enemies of the State."

 Sergeant Durbin became totally unhinged at that remark. "You can’t do that! It violates the Geneva Convention!"

 "Actually, no. In interrogating each one of you at the time of your capture we determined that the reasons you were where you were when we took you prisoner was because you were spies for the Allies."

 Each man took his turn denying:

 "That's a lie!"

 "No way in hell!"

 "Not me!"

 "You've made some kind of mistake."

 Everyone, that is, but Kaufmann. He simply spat on the floor.

 "Let's take each one of you in turn." Dr. Meyer took a piece of paper from his coat and unfolded it. "Sgt. Durbin, immediately before the squad you were fighting with was captured, you were seen wearing a uniform from one of the German officers your squad killed. Fortunately for us, when you yelled out to one of your men 'Let’s twenty-three skidoo!' we were able to identify you as Americans."

 Durbin objected, "I wore that man's coat because it was cold. Plus, we were getting ready to retreat. We had gotten behind the Allied lines by mistake."

 "Twenty-three skidoo? Not exactly a military term, is it?"

 A couple of the other prisoners laughed.

 Meyer focused on one of the men who laughed and walked toward him. "Private Jim Smith, if that is your real name. You surrendered to a German infantry unit claiming you had run out of food. You said you were AWOL, but your own unit listed you as on a classified mission."

 No longer laughing, Private Smith stammered, "I, uh, swear to you. I left when things were in a state of confusion. They must have screwed up."

 "Yes." Meyer pursed his lips, "Sure." The Doctor then turned to Corporal Puchinsky. "You, Corporal, I have not quite figured out. You dropped a grenade in your own foxhole, grabbed the man you were with and yanked him out. You both lived, obviously, but you destroyed a whole briefcase full of German maps and orders that would have been quite a catch for an Allied spy. I suppose I should thank you."

 Puchinsky said nothing.

 "And here we have," Meyer moved toward his next victim, "Private O'Neil. He hid on the back of a German tanker truck hoping to blow it up when it reached its destination at a Luftwaffe base." Dr. Meyer patted O'Neil on the shoulder. "Too bad the truck was loaded with water."

 Separated from the other four men was Corporal Kaufmann, chewing on a sliver of wood he pulled from his bunk.

 As he approached Kaufmann, having lost the smile from his face that he wore during the other stories, Dr. Meyer took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and held them out to the Corporal.

 "Thanks," Kaufmann said as he took one from the pack. "Got a light?"

 The Doctor flipped open his lighter and struck up a flame instantaneously. "How's this?"

 Drawing in the flame smoothly, Kaufmann answered without a flinch, "Perfect."

 "Tell me, Corporal. What were you doing in Africa when we caught you changing a tire on your jeep?"

 Kaufmann blew a puff of smoke in the Doctor's direction. "Changing a tire."

 "You must have known where you were."

 Shrugging, "Africa?"

 "And a mile away from Rommel's camp."

 "Should I have stopped by and said hello?"

 "I think not." The Doctor gave Kaufmann the whole pack of cigarettes and then stood next to the guard once again. "Take the pieces of paper and write on them the name of the man you want set free. But I warn you... In the case of a tie, from two way to five way, the whole contest will be null and void and you will all be shot. If anyone abstains from voting, you will all be shot. If anyone votes for a man not present, say for instance, General Eisenhower, you will all be shot."

“That’s it?” Kaufmann asked. “You just shoot us?”

“Well, there is an addendum that might shed new light on it. A full confession by the remaining four would forego the execution as long as the man who had been set free also confesses, thereby surrendering his impending freedom. Of course, this would all seem to render the entire contest moot, but it would make each and every voter just a bit more careful on casting his vote.”

Durbin’s eyebrows sat low on his face as he asked, “What the hell is the point?”

“The point, my good man, is for me to see just what you alleged heroes are really made of, and just how far you will go to defend yourself and your fellow man.” Meyer stared at the floor for a second. "Let me see. Is that everything? Yes, I do believe it is. I will be back at sunset to pick up your ballots."

 "Doctor," the Sergeant spoke, "you wouldn't be lying to us, would you?"

 As the Doctor turned to exit the barracks he answered coldly, "No. But what do you have to lose either way."

 "I think it should be clear to everyone what our path is here, gentleman," Sergeant Durbin said as he paced among the other four men. "We have to all agree that we vote for one man so that we can make a plan for him once he's free. And that person should be me."

 "Are you nuts?" Corporal Puchinsky said as he turned toward the wall looking into the mirror hanging there and stroking his scruffy chin. “I'm not doing it."

 "Why not?" The Sergeant was not use to anyone questioning his orders. "We can't leave this thing to chance. If they really are going to release one of us, that person has to get to the closest Allied division and let them know where the rest of are."

 "That's bullshit, Sarge!" Private O'Neil said, void of any tact. "Do you expect us to believe that General Eisenhower would swoop in like a mother eagle and rescue three non-coms and two enlisted men? I don't think so."

 "Private, what you think is not important. I'm in command here."

 "Hmmph." Puchinsky swung his head around without moving his body. "Some command."

 Back in the Sergeant's face, O'Neil could have cared less about the stripes on a man's sleeve. "Your orders in here are about like you... Ineffective."

 "Yeah, I was wondering, Sarge," Smith picked up Puchinsky's attitude, "when Herr Doktor tells your story it almost sounds heroic, until the end. But when you tell the same story it sounds more believable... and pretty moronic."

 Puchinsky did a sort of hula motion as he uttered, "Twenty-three skidoo!"

 But Durbin remained unintimidated. "Were you dancing when you dropped that grenade in the foxhole?"

 "Hey," Puchinsky never skipped a beat, "I may be all thumbs, but my buddy's alive in a German prison camp instead of dead and in pieces."

 "Nobody in my unit was killed!!"

 "I'm sure. It's kind of hard getting shot for desertion when your sergeant is leading the way."

 Durbin reached for Puchinsky's throat, but Smith and O'Neil both grabbed the Sergeant's arms and pulled him back.

 "Come on, Sarge," Smith said. "We're supposed to be fighting the Gerries, not each other."

 O'Neil also went in with Smith. "Besides, I'd be thinking that maybe this is exactly what they want us to do... Claw at each other like wildcats."

 This banter back and forth only slightly amused the other Corporal in the room. Joel Kaufmann sat in the corner, quiet since Dr. Meyer left. None of the men were allowed a watch, but Kaufmann kept track of time by the number of cigarette butts lying in front of him. Each smoke lasted exactly seven minutes, and with nine butts at his feet he knew they had been left alone for over an hour.

 As he struck another match on the side of his pants, Joel clamped down on his tenth smoke and uttered two words. "Shut up!"

 A reaction the Sergeant himself could not have hoped for, everyone in the room stopped mid-sentence and gave full attention to the separatist Corporal.

 "If any of you guys want to get out alive, you'd better shut up."

 Still shaking a bit from his confrontation, Sergeant Durbin stared deep into Kaufmann's eyes. "Tell me something, Corporal Tough Guy. Just what the hell were you doing in Africa?"

 Kaufmann looked down at the floor and chuckled slightly. "No way, Sarge! No way in hell!"

 "Why not? We're all friends here."

 "And just how in the name of hell do I know that! I don't know you guys from spit! All you need to know is exactly what Dr. Frankenstein there already told. That I was changing a tire on my Jeep just a mile away from Rommel's camp... All that proves is that they had nails on the roads by Rommel just like everywhere else in the Goddamn world."

 “So I suppose you have a better idea than voting for me to be set free?” Durbin asked.

 “Right now,” Kaufmann replied, “I wouldn’t vote for my own mother to get out of this camp. If you think that they’re going to let you waltz right out of here without a catch, then you’re the moron. The only way they would let you get to the allies is to strap a bomb to your ass.”

 “You’re wrong. They want us to rat on each other, and they’re hoping that this will make us do it. But once they realize that we’re not going to talk, even under threat of execution, then they’ll re-think the whole thing.”

 “Yeah, they’ll re-think it all right. As soon as you’re fifty feet from the gate, they’re going to put a 9mm slug in the back of your head. I suppose if everyone were to vote for someone else besides you that you would still keep your mouth shut, even under threat of execution. Tell me, Sarge. Have you ever had a squad of rifles pointed at your head while someone else is counting down?”

 “Of course, not.”

 “Well, I have. The German heroes who captured me in Africa decided to play a little game with me, thinking I would tell them what I was doing in Africa. It was when they counted down to one and I hadn’t said a Goddamn thing that they decided I must be a spy.”

 “So, what does that prove?”

 “Nothing. I just wanted everyone to realize that these guys are trying to win a war. You don’t do that by setting people free. They expect us to talk, no matter who wins the vote. They figure if we can’t reach a mutual agreement that one or two of us will break ranks and sing like parakeets.”

 “How do you know that?”

 “Think about it, Sarge. Would we let a German soldier go if four other Germans voted for him?”

 Durbin remained indifferent to the Corporal.

 But gradually the attitude of the other three men seemed to calm a bit as they gazed at Kaufmann and thought about what he said.

 O'Neil broke the silence that held everyone motionless for the past couple of minutes. "I guess we need to know how we’re going to do this."

 Kaufmann took one more hit from his cigarette. “There is only one way to make sure that they don’t win this round.”

 The pink glow of the sky at dusk came through the barracks windows as Dr. Meyer stood with his back to the door and the guard strolled through the room. Each of the men would hesitate only momentarily before handing their ballots to the guard. And when the time came for Kaufmann to give up his ballot, he rolled it up like cigarette and stuck it between his lips.

 The guard yanked the faux cigarette out of the Corporal's mouth and prepared to backhand him, but Dr. Meyer stopped him by clearing his throat loudly. Instead the guard spit in Kaufmann's face, and then strutted back to the Doctor's side.

 "Well," Dr. Meyer began, "how do you think you all did?"

 “How long are you going to keep us in suspense?” Durbin asked.

 “Why, Sergeant? Are you anxious, to be free? Or are you anxious to die?”

 Corporal Kaufmann smiled and laughed. “Either way, we’ll be free.”

 “If anyone would care to prevent an unfortunate outcome,” Dr. Meyer said, “I will begin taking names of those of you who would like to tell their story. As soon as all five of you agree to that, we can stop talking about executions… Anyone?”

 Surprising the other four men in the group, Kaufmann stepped forward.

 Dr. Meyer could not contain a huge smile. “Corporal, I am stunned, to say the least.”

 “I only wanted to say that I would be the first to volunteer to be shot, Herr Doctor.”

 Meyer’s smile disappeared, and he turned away from the men. “I’m sure there will be plenty of time for that later.”

 At Luftwaffe headquarters in Potsdam, a black staff car pulled closed to the front door and parked. The driver quickly got out and opened the door for his passenger, Dr. August Meyer. Dr. Meyer carried only a leather satchel with a small padlock on the leather and brass latch. Not in any apparent hurry to get to where he was going, Meyer’s pace took a pattern that seemed unsure. He would start to walk fast, and then almost stop before beginning his stride again.

 At the office of Colonel Hans Metzger, Dr. Meyer reached up to knock on the door, but then stopped for a moment. When he did finally knock, a harsh voice bellowed out, “Kommen!”

 The hesitant doctor opened the door slowly and entered.

 “Dr. Meyer,” Metzger said, “I didn’t know you were in town.”

 “I wasn’t planning on it until last night. I needed to talk to you right away.”

 “Certainly. What about, Doctor?”

 “I finished my examination of the prisoner specimens.”

 “And what have you concluded from the tests?”

 Dr. Meyer set the satchel on the floor and sat in chair the facing the Colonel’s desk. “I feel it is my duty to report that the study did not go the way we had hoped.”

 “You mean your tests were inconclusive?”

 “No, it’s conclusive. I feel you should report to the Fuhrer that a cross section of allied prisoners has revealed that they are extremely loyal to their respective governments and to their mission as soldiers. I’m afraid that there is little hope of allied morale falling to a level that would insure our winning the war.”

 “Come now, August. Don’t you think that this is a bit premature?”

 “I have been working with these prisoners for nearly a year now. My last group of five was a mix of heroes and cowards. I handpicked these men to fail because I believed that the men I suspected of cowardice would turn on the others who were being accused of esponianage. In a little less than twelve hours, the heroes were able to convince the others to die for a cause that just weeks before they were not longer willing to fight for. Do you have any idea how hard it was for me to find allied soldiers who were deserting? And when I do, some cold blooded Americaner convinces them to die for someplace that in some cases wasn’t even their country.”

 “So what does all this prove, Doctor?”

 “It means the Fuhrer was only half right when he said the West is decadent. Each of them individually may be undisciplined and unfocused. But as soon as you get a group together as small as five, they bond together and become an immoveable force. And it doesn’t matter where they’re from, whether it’s America, England, or anywhere else in the alliance. They quite effectively become a unit and become a very dangerous element to the Third Reich.”

 “Doctor,” Metzger said as he rose from his chair, “you were supposed to find out what it would take for these men to either talk about their own activities or the activities of others. What do you find out?”

 Dr. Meyer reached into his pocket and withdrew five pieces of paper, holding them in the palm of his hand. “I’ll tell you what I found out. These are ballots, a technique I’ve used before. The subjects are asked to vote on one man to be released from the group. The rest will be executed.”

 “Executed?”

 “We tell them that, anyway. Then I add a proviso. If each of them, including the man who was to be set free, will tell us what their mission was before they got caught, they will not be shot. They are required to vote for one of the other men.”

 “And what happened?”

 “Four of the men voted for General Eisenhower.”

 The colonel almost laughed but caught himself. “The fifth man voted for himself?”

 “No. The fifth man voted for General Patton. This represents the only lack of unity that now exists in the group.”

 “You over-emphasize the importance of your studies.”

 Dr. Meyer reached down and picked up his satchel. “No, Colonel. I wish I was. In this case is every document of every specimen I examined. The conclusions are incontrovertible. You have to tell the Fuhrer that this war will never be won unless we can significantly outgun the allies. Otherwise, we are doomed.”

 “Calm yourself. You are so sure you cannot be wrong?”

 “No, I am not wrong. And we have yet to touch American soil, yet American men are ready to die for the Englanders. Imagine the poor nation that attacked the United States itself.”

 “You’re talking about one of our allies now.”

 “I can only hope that Japan will realize what I have already found out, before they are dealt a devastating blow.”

 The colonel moved to the window and looked outside. “I’ll not tell the Fuhrer about this.”

 “Why not?”

 “Because our Fuhrer will not look favorably on the person who tells him he cannot win this war. It would mean an end to your career.” Metzger turned to the doctor. “And maybe even your life. Look, summer is almost here. June begins next week. Give me everything you have and let me look it over. If we haven’t turned a corner by next fall, I’ll consider taking this to the Fuhrer.”

 “I think it’s a mistake to wait.”

 “And I think it would be dangerous for you if I took this to him now. Trust me, Doctor. By the end of this year you will be feeling differently about the Americans and us. We will have been victorious, and 1944 will be the beginning of a whole new Germany.”

 *…the voice of a nurse shaking my arm telling me they needed to move me brought me away from the safe house. I could feel pain again. In fact, the pain was so great while they moved me I cried out. “Why does it hurt so much?”*

 *“You’ve had surgery,” the nurse replied.*

 *“But the local shouldn’t have worn off yet.”*

 *“You didn’t have a local… Don’t you remember? The anesthesiologist didn’t want to stick a needle in your spine for fear of infection. The last thing you need right now is staph in your spine.”*

 *They finished torturing me, and one of the nurses said, “It looks like you’re going to be here a while. They still don’t have a room for you.”*

 *Wonderful… No room, so I get to spend the night in the morgue.*

*“You’re not in the morgue.”*

 *Did I say it out loud? I didn’t think I did.*

 *“Anyway, in a few hours we’ll bring you breakfast. We don’t have menus down here, so you’ll just have to tell me what you want.”*

 *Food was the last thing on my mind. The thought of it made me ill.*

 *“Well, think about it. I’ll check back later.”*

 *I didn’t hear her leave. In fact, I don’t remember hearing her footsteps at all. Maybe she wore tennis shoes.*

 *Curiosity got the best of me and I tried raising myself up a bit. But the pain in my leg signaled to me I couldn’t do that the way I did it. So I reached the controller dangling over the rail. I’m not sure why the TV control buttons existed on it. The only monitors anywhere close showed images of numbers and graphs, not sitcom or police show. I had to decipher the bed controls. I didn’t want my legs to go up… just my back.*

 *As I gradually raised up, the other beds and occupants in the room became visible. They seemed to be the standard fare… one man with his leg elevated and wrapped similar to mine, another simply lying flat with oxygen and an IV, and one with a bandage wrapped once around his head and a white patch covering one eye.*

 *There was one more…*

 *I couldn’t see the fourth man’s head. His sheet lay tight across his stomach which rose high enough to block the view of his face. It seemed from that angle his body had been completely covered… Was I in the morgue?*

 *A flash of light drew me away from his bed, but I immediately glanced back… and standing next the fourth man’s bed towered the same image I remembered from my dream. A tall man in a long coat. His imaged remained only a silhouette next to the covered man. The light shining down on the bed didn’t glow onto the tall man.*

 *I called out, “Who are you?”*

 *No answer.*

 *“Are you a doctor? I didn’t see you come in.”*

 *None of the other men in the room acknowledged the tall man’s presence or reacted to my inquiries. I reached for the button to call the nurse, and the tall man raised his arm and pointed toward me…*

**The Ghost in the Lens**

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            “My daughter is dead.”

            Oscar Gruel stood at the doorway of the two story Victorian house and gazed into the eyes of a very distraught man in a black suit, holding a cigarette in one hand and a wallet photo in the other.  “You’ll need to put out the cigarette.”

            The man in the suit dropped the cigarette onto the porch floor, ground it out, and brushed it away with his boot.  “Will you help me?” he asked as he held up the tiny photo of a girl who looked to be about seven or eight years old.

            Oscar opened the left half of a huge oak double door and stood back, motioning toward the hallway.  “Come in.”

            Taking wary steps into the foyer of the old house, the man carefully tucked the photograph into his inside jacket pocket as he gazed at the contents of Oscar’s abode.  “You have a lot of old things,” he said, taking note of the antiquities lining the shelves in the hall and on wooden shelves along the wall of the spiral staircase.  Lanterns once used as the primary source of light in a home now stood dormant as decorations, occasionally accompanied by unused candles on tarnished silver candlesticks.  Three or four clocks in the foyer all indicated a different time, one its hands and pendulum no longer keeping pace but showing the exact moment it stopped.

            “A lifetime of acquisition brings fortune and clutter… Usually the latter.”

            Inside a room they passed stood an enormous camera with a lens attached by what looked like an accordion.  The tripod holding it up was constructed of wood, its legs comprised of three two by twos connected by a one by two nailed to each of the legs.  The dust caked onto the top surfaces of the tripod to maybe a sixteenth of an inch in places, but the camera could be described as pristine – even the lens sparkled in the dim light.  “Is that your camera?”

            “It belonged to my father.  He took photographs back when it wasn’t just a hobby for most people.”  As they approached a doorway to the back of the foyer, Oscar stopped the other man by placing his hand on the man’s chest.  “There’s the matter of the money.”

            “The money?”

            “Yes.  I don’t just do this out of the goodness of my heart, Mr. Defries.  After seventy-five years I’ve not got much heart left.”

            “I didn’t bring it with me.  I also didn’t bring my daughter today.”

            “I do have to have it before we can do this.”

            “I know.  I know.”

            Oscar looked into the man’s eyes for a moment and removed his hand.  “Okay.  I’ll let you see the gallery and you can decide for yourself then.  Remember… If you try to tell someone because you think you’ve been conned later, no one will believe you.  And those who do believe won’t care.”

            “I just want your help.”

            “I’m not a magician.  This isn’t going to bring her back to life.”

            “Please, Mr. Gruel.  You’re my only hope for her.”

            Oscar closed his eyes and opened the door.

            The room Oscar revealed bore no furniture except for a small table in one corner topped with photos in frames of various sizes.  Every wall held so many photos as to render the paint on the walls inert.  Portraits of people from the Victorian Era to present day spotted the walls in a random pattern suggesting the placement relied only on size.  If an 8x10 photo fit in a spot it was placed there without regard to the photos around it.

            “So many people,” Defries said.  “It looks like you’ve been doing this for a very long time.”

            “The oldest ones are my father’s.  He started this practice over a hundred years ago.  There are a few he simply collected. Once he realized there was a market for this he began taking the portraits himself.”

            “And you’re saying that at least one person in each photo is, uh…”

            “Dead?  Yes, Mr. Defries.  They most certainly are.  That is the purpose of your trip here today, is it not?”

            Defries studied the walls and marveled at the people in the photos.  “You can’t tell.”

            “Some of them, my father’s anyway, you have to know what to look for.  He had to retouch the eyes if they were open.  There is no life in the eyes once a person passes.  So they have to be fixed.”

            “A few look like they’re asleep.”

            “They are asleep, Mr. Defries.  Eternal sleep.”

            Defries continued walking along the gallery, viewing it as he would a museum. “Amazing.”  He stopped at a photo of two men in dark Armani suits standing next to each other.  “This one looks more recent.”

            “That one is mine.  The Shasta brothers…”

            “And one of them is dead?”

            “Of course.”

            After gazing at the photo a bit, Defries said, “Let me guess.  It’s the one the other brother is pointing to.”

            “Exactly the opposite.”  Oscar stepped closer to the photo.  “Interesting story about that one.  They were in business together… Partners, if you will.  When the one brother died, the other decided it would be advantageous to have a photo of the two of them together to promote the business as a joint venture… even though all the profits would now be his exclusively.  The deceased brother had no family.”

            “So why did he want his brother to point to him.”

            “He didn’t.  That is the result of my skills.  We didn’t prop him in that fashion… The photo revealed the indication… You see, what no one knew was that the living brother had injected a potassium solution into his partner of forty years making it look like, for all intents and purposes, the man had died of a heart attack.  The coroner, or even I, had no clue it had been caused by anything other than stress and age.  But the photo drove him to paranoia… He confessed about six months after the death of his brother… Not exactly the ‘Tell Tale Heart,’ but it did its due diligence.”

            Defries kept looking at the photo of the two men a minute or two longer holding his hand on his chin and stroking his upper lip with his index finger.  But soon he broke away and continued his tour.  “The color photos are all yours.”

            “Yes.  A combination of film and digital work.”

            “They are amazing.  I truly can’t identify the person not alive in your photos.  You do a much better job of fixing them.”

            “Fixing them?”  Oscar folded his arm.  “You don’t understand.  I don’t fix them.  My photos reveal the soul of the person… even dead.  Something even my father couldn’t achieve.”

            “How is that possible?”

            “I don’t know.  And frankly, I don’t care.  But I have had this gift from the first time I pointed an old Argoflex and took a photo of a man my father was prepping for a funeral.  He yelled at me for being in the embalming room, but he couldn’t resist developing the photo that same day… We had our own dark room… When he saw the photo he very quickly bought me a better camera and put me to work.”

            “And you can’t explain it?”

            “Can you explain the nature of things, Mr. Defries?  For instance, can you explain how a man of your apparent care and concern could spend the last – how old was your daughter?”

            “Thirteen.”

            “The last thirteen years without taking a single photo of your loving daughter?”

            Pulling the wallet photo from his pocket, Defries answered, “I have this photo.”

            “Charming.  A school photo taken years ago.  And all you have is a wallet photo.  Did you even buy the package?”

            Defries looked at the floor as he tucked the photo away again.  “No. I got it from a friend of hers.”

            “So now you want to make up in one post-mortem photo the years of neglect you bestowed on this poor girl.”

            “You don’t understand.  I loved Forsythia dearly.  She was my pride and joy.  Shortly after she was born my wife suffered post-partum depression.  She tried to suffocate her when she was just six months old.  I was able to stop it, and my wife eventually spent some time in a hospital, trying to recover.  She even blocked it from her memory.  Mr. Gruel, you can recover from many things… Knowing you tried to kill your own daughter is something you carry with you all your life.”

            “So you took no photos of the girl.”

            “My wife and I separated after she was released, only for the sake of Forsythia she said.  I retained custody, and for the longest time she wouldn’t even see our daughter.  Photographs even made her cry. The few times we spent any time together, Forsythia took care of me – not my wife. If we would walk in the park, Forsythia walked at my side while my wife walked behind us.”

            “What happened to Forsythia?”

            His eyes appearing to fill with tears, Defries replied, “The last couple years my daughter developed her own form of depression.  I think she believed her mother didn’t love her.  They had only a few visits over the years, and those always went south quickly… About a month or two ago, my wife suggested we have a family photo taken... I thought it was a marvelous idea…”  Defries lowered his head again.  “And then just two days ago my daughter locked herself into the bathroom and,” he took a deep breath, “she slashed her wrists.”

            Oscar’s head popped back at the last sentenced.  “Slashed, you say?”

            “Yes.  I was devastated.”

            Keeping his hands clasped behind him, Oscar walked toward the door slowly.  “I must tell you… the soul doesn’t always reveal the spirit the living want to see… But she will appear to be alive… Bring the money and your daughter no later than tomorrow afternoon.  I will take the photo.”

            “I was hoping we could discuss the price, Mr. Gruel.  Twenty thousand dollars is a lot of money.”

            Just short of the doorway, Oscar stopped and turned to Mr. Defries.  “It’s a lot of money for a photograph… But it’s a bargain for clearing one’s conscience.  I will not barter on the service, and you should not attempt to negotiate the price of your daughter’s soul.”

            “All right, all right.  How do I get my daughter’s body here?  I can’t just put her in my car.”

            “Where is she now?”

            “They still have her at the city morgue.  I haven’t selected a funeral home yet.”

            “Tell them to send her here.  I still have a mortician’s license even though I don’t practice that aspect of my father’s business anymore.  They’ll send her in an ambulance and bill it to you.  Once I’ve completed our part of the service, I’ll call the funeral home you want to prepare her for burial.  Know this. You must have her sent here no later than tomorrow afternoon.  Beyond three days there is no guarantee this will work.”

            “Why is that?”

            “I haven’t the foggiest idea.  Does it matter?”

            “I’ll have her brought here by tomorrow.  My wife and I will be here tomorrow afternoon.”

            “Very good, Mr. Defries.”  Oscar stepped out of the room and down the hallway.  “You can show yourself out.”

            With his hands tucked in his pockets, Defries left the room, and moments later Oscar heard his front door shut.

            A rather large blue-gray cat strolled into the room and jumped onto a table near Oscar, declaring something in the form of a pleading “Meow!”

            “What’s the matter, Lucius?” Oscar asked as he stroked the cat’s head.  “I think I fed you this morning, didn’t I?”

            Lucius looked to the door, as if pointing to the man who just left, and meowed once again.

            “I know.  I didn’t like him either.  But if I turned away everyone I didn’t like I would still be an undertaker… and not a successful one even then. And besides,” Oscar said as he picked up Lucius and walked toward the door, scratching under his chin, “this one will be the last. We can do this, pack our things, and head to a sunnier climate… away from all this death.” He flipped off the light switch before leaving the room. “Come on.  Let’s go set up the studio so we can relax later.”

            “Where is Forsythia?”  The woman’s voice trembled as she scanned the studio.

            “They delivered her an hour ago,” Oscar said as he led the woman through the foyer.  “My nephew will be bringing her up in a wheelchair in just a few minutes.”

            “Your nephew?”  The woman seemed appalled.  “Did he dress her?”

            “Calm yourself, Mrs. Defries.  Andrew is a premed student at SIU.  He would never be affected by anyone in a state of undress.  I wouldn’t allow him anywhere near here if I didn’t trust him whole-heartedly.”

            Mr. Defries found a seat at the center of the studio and gazed around at the equipment as he listened to the conversation.  “The examiner had already dressed her in some underthings when I went to see them this morning.  After they found out what we were doing they didn’t want me to see the autopsy marks.”

            Mrs. Defries shot an angry stare at her husband.  “They did an autopsy?”

            “Yes, Judith.  I told you they would.  Suicide is a homicide, and when there is doubt they always do an autopsy.”

            “I just can’t stand the thought of someone cutting up my baby.”  Judith placed her hand over her mouth and turned away, slowly walking to the wall.

            Oscar lightly grabbed Defries’s shoulder and spoke softly to him.  “You went to see your daughter this morning?”

            “Yes,” he replied, and he straightened in his chair.  “I, uh, needed a few moments alone with her.  When we’re done here we’re having the funeral home pick her up. We’ll be having a closed casket burial service at the cemetery once they’ve prepared her.  We won’t have much time to be with her later.”

            “I see.”  Oscar held his hand out.  “You have the money, don’t you?”

            “Yes,” he replied as he hesitantly reached into his coat pocket for an envelope.  “It wasn’t easy to gather that much money on short notice… especially cash.”

            “I’m sorry.  I don’t like spending my resources in tracking down rubber checks… You understand.  Don’t you, Mr. Defries?”

            “I suppose.”  He handed Oscar the envelope.

            “Thank you, Mr. Defries.”  Oscar tucked the envelope into his own coat pocket.

            “Aren’t you going to count it?”

            “Why?  Should I?”

            Defries shook his head. “It’s all there.”

 “Good.”

            The sound of a wheelchair and footsteps caught everyone’s attention, and the three of them glanced towards the doorway.  A young man with long brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard entered pushing the wheelchair in which Forsythia Defries reposed.  A plaid scarf attached to the handles of the chair held her head up, and her hands lay folded in her lap.  A bright pink dress with a lace neck and sleeves contrasted her pale skin, though it appeared as though some makeup had been applied.  The curls in her blond hair fell to both sides of her face, again putting color into an otherwise colorless countenance.

            Judith let out a gasp when her eyes met with her daughter.  “Oh God!  I don’t know if I can do this.”

            With only a moment of hesitation, Defries rose from his chair and stepped up next to his wife.  “It’s okay, Judith.  We agreed this was the best thing.”

            Through tears, Judith said, “She is so pale.  Couldn’t we put some makeup on her?”

            “I wouldn’t advise it,” Oscar said.  “A light coat of base helps eliminate the yellowish gray color the deceased take on.  Too much will interfere with my photograph.  She would simply look like a dead person with lots of makeup.”

            “Forsythia was so pale anyway,” Defries said.  “Do you want her to look like something she’s not?”

            Still fighting back tears, Judith closed her eyes and shook her head.  “Where do you want me?”

            A demeanor gentler than Defries had seen from him, Oscar took Judith by the arm and guided her toward some seats in the center of the studio.  “I just need you to sit on the highest stool behind the chair.  Your husband will sit on the other stool, and I will position Forsythia in the chair.”

            “Uh, I’d like to be on Judith’s left.” Defries said.  “Can we switch the seats?”

            “Certainly,” Oscar said as he swapped the position of the stools.  “Is that to your liking?”

            “Yes.  It’s just like a photo of my mother when she was a girl… You understand.”

            “Of course.”  He helped Judith sit on the high stool and stood back a bit.  “There.  You look fine there.  Now just relax and we’ll get this over with in due course.”

            Defries moved toward the other stool now on Judith’s left.  “Is this good?”

            “Yes, Mr. Defries,” Oscar said as he watched Defries swing a leg over the stool and drop onto it.  “Perfect.”  He motioned to Andrew and said, “I’ll need your help to get the young lady into the chair.”

            “Sure thing, Doc.”

            With only a slight struggle, Oscar and Andrew placed Forsythia in the chair.  Andrew pulled the wheelchair out of the way while Oscar straightened the girl’s hair, smoothed some wrinkles out of her dress, and placed her hands on her lap.  While jostling with her hands, Oscar asked of Andrew, “Did you do something with her hands?”

            “No, but I know what you’re talking about.  It’s like rigor is still present.  But it can’t be.”

            “No matter.  Probably just a contracted muscle that won’t release now… It’s just odd it’s in both hands.”  Oscar stood and gazed at his subjects a moment.  “That will work.  I need to do one more thing.  I’m going to open her eyes… Please, don’t look into her eyes during this.  You won’t like what you see.  Eyes don’t look as they do when we are alive.”

            “Then why open them at all?” Defries asked.

            “Because they will look normal in my photograph… Again, you must trust me.”

Oscar gently took his fingers and lifted her eyelids, revealing gray, colorless pupils seemingly gazing only into oblivion.  Judith actually turned her head away while Oscar performed the action, but Defries curiously watched and stared into his daughter’s eyes, perhaps trying to see if what Oscar said was true.

“Now,” Oscar said as he backed toward his camera, “Relax for a moment or two while I adjust some settings here.  We will only have one shot at this.”

“Why?” Defries asked.  “Isn’t that a digital camera?  Why can’t you take more than one?”

Oscar stood erect and shook his head as he glared at Defries.  “This is not a third grade photo I’m taking here.  I am photographing an image you can’t see with the naked eye… and one you couldn’t capture with a hundred thousand dollars worth of camera equipment… So shall we continue?”

“I’m sorry.”

For nearly a minute, Oscar looked into the viewfinder of his camera, occasionally glancing at the family and mostly at Forsythia.  Once he knitted his brow while staring into the camera and said, “Hmm.”

“Do you see something?” Defries asked.

“No,” Oscar replied.  “Now, please be still.”  Another half minute passed… and Oscar pressed the shutter release.  The camera beeped for about ten seconds during which Oscar said, “Perfectly still.”  The camera snapped.

The knitted brow moved to Defries’s face.  “The flash didn’t go off.”

“Only an amateur uses flash.”  Oscar opened a small door on the side of the camera and pulled out the memory card.  “And now,” he said as he carried it to a laptop setting on a table off to the side, “we shall see what we shall see.”  To Andrew he said, “Please take Forsythia to the prep room downstairs.”

Judith stroked Forsythia’s hair for a few seconds.  “May I go with him?”

“I suppose,” Oscar said.  “But please, just a few minutes downstairs.  I’m afraid the smells will overcome you if you spend too much time down there.”

After closing her eyelids again, Andrew gently lifted Forsythia from the recliner and eased her into the wheelchair, reapplying the scarf to help keep her head from falling.  “Would you like to push her?” he asked Judith.

Judith nodded and began guiding the wheelchair with her daughter out the door.

“There’s an elevator just down the back hallway.”

Oscar, seated at a stool behind the laptop, pressed a few keys and slowly swiped across the touchpad.  “I need to store a few of these other photos on another drive.”

“You’ve done this a lot?” Defries asked.

With a glint that flattened the top side of his eyes, Oscar stared at Defries.  “I’ve done this all my life… Haven’t you been listening?”

“I just got the impression you’ve sort of quit.”

“Not yet.  But soon.”  After just a couple more keystrokes Oscar paused and stared at the screen and almost smiled.  “Now that is interesting.”

Defries remained on the stool.  “What is it?”

“Forsythia is pointing her finger.”

“At Judith?”  Defries stood and took a deep breath.  “Oh, my God!  You don’t suppose she’s pointing at Judith because she had something to do with her death, do you?  I mean, I sort of suspected that Judith was afraid of Forsythia… But I never imagined she would do something like that.”

“I don’t think you understand, Mr. Defries.”  Oscar turned the laptop around.  The image of Forsythia took on a very alert and even colorful pose, her index pointing up just a tad and her eyes narrowed below a knitted brow and staring in the same direction as her finger… toward Mr. Defries.  “She’s pointing at you.”

Defries buckled at his knees and stumbled toward the laptop.  “That can’t be… That’s impossible.”

“Is it, Mr. Defries?  Why was it possible when you thought she was pointing at your wife?  And look at her eyes… Those are angry eyes.  She seems very angry with you… Why is that, Mr. Defries?”

“You’ve done something with the photo.  Didn’t you?  You’ve altered the photo.  She couldn’t have pointed her finger at me.”  He stared at the photo on the screen.  “And those are not her eyes.  Her eyes were almost white.”  He grabbed across the table at Oscar’s coat.  “You did this, you old bastard!”

A gasp at the door took Defries’s attention away from Oscar and he caught a glimpse of Judith standing there with her hand over her mouth.  “You killed her.”

“Judith.”  He released Oscar and moved toward his wife.  “Judith, no.”

“You pig!  You took her away from me every chance you had and finally sent her to her death?”

“Judith,” he said as he grabbed her by the shoulders, “it’s all a trick.  She couldn’t have pointed at me.  The old fool made it look that way.”

“And yet,” Oscar said, “when I first said she was pointing her fingers, you assumed it was at your wife.”  Looking at Judith, Oscar said, “And he was quite ready to accuse you of Forsythia’s untimely demise.”

Judith’s eyes darted back and forth from Oscar to her husband, and she only stopped sobbing for a second.  “How could you?”  Judith shook herself away from her husband’s grasp.  “Sweet Jesus!  You killed her and then tried to blame me?  What is wrong with you?”  She slapped Oscar so hard he bent to one side and stumbled.  “You are a sick, sick man.”

“Judith, I’m sorry.  I’m so sorry.”  Defries held one hand over the cheek his wife had slapped and stood straight again.  “I could never have killed her… I loved her with all my heart.”

“I have to ask, Mrs. Defries.  When Forsythia was a baby, do you really remember trying to kill her?  Or is that something you were told during your depression treatment?”

Now Judith place both hands over her mouth.  “God in Heaven!”  She backed away from Defries.  “You did that then, too.”

“No, Judith.  I swear…”

“Do you hate me so much that you would see me put away for her murder?”

“I suspect,” Oscar continued as he closed the laptop, “he didn’t want you to go to jail, just as he didn’t have you charged when she was a baby.  He needs you.  In order to keep you close he needed a power over you.  It nearly worked once.  But you left him.  He needed to be sure you wouldn’t leave him again.”

Shaking her head and walking backwards, Judith cried and kept saying, “You killed our baby!  You killed our only baby!  You heartless bastard.”  She turned and ran out the front door, shrieking, “Murderer!” all the way down the street.

Defries stood in the studio doorway, his head down with one hand on his cheek and the other at his side.

From another coat pocket, Oscar pulled out a phone and pressed three numbers on the screen.  “Yes, this is Oscar Gruel, and I’d like to report a homicide… No, it happened a few days ago.  But I just discovered the details… Well, could you send someone to my studio?  Both the killer and the decedent are here… Oh, I’m fine.  I’m sure he won’t give me any trouble… I think he’s too scared right now.”  He touched the pad on his phone and put it back in his pocket.  “Why don’t you have a seat, Mr. Defries?”

Defries dropped onto the floor and sat with his knees tucked close to his chest. “Forsythia,” he said as he put his face between his knees.

“Poor, Mr. Defries.  Enough hatred in you to rain it down on your wife and your daughter…”

“I swear I didn’t do it… It was Judith… I could never kill Forsythia… I loved her more than life itself.”

“No.  You only love yourself… What you felt for them was something… else.”

“Mr. Gruel,” the voice of a woman in the basement stairwell echoed through the hallway and into the prep room where Oscar stood over the body of Forsythia Defries, covered up to her chest with a white sheet.

“I’m in here,” Oscar replied.

Stopping just at the doorway, Judith Defries gazed at the body of her daughter, holding a slight smile in her eyes.  She took a deep breath before she took a few steps toward the table, Oscar placing himself between Judith and Forsythia effectively blocking the view.

“Are you sure you should be here?” Oscar asked.

“Yes.”  Judith did not try to look around Oscar.  “I really came to thank you, and perhaps see Forsythia one more time.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m much better now.  My husband has been arrested for Forsythia’s murder.  Without your help I don’t think that would have taken place.”

“I did nothing.”

“But you knew.”

Seeing that she was in a more stable emotional state, Oscar moved toward the table and allowed Judith to approach.  “I suspected.  But I wasn’t really sure until he so quickly made some quite perplexing assumptions. Coupled with the odd conditions of her hands and wounds, something didn’t seem right.”

“Oh?”  Judith swallowed. “Odd condition of her hands?”

“Yes.”  Oscar uncovered Forsythia’s arm and held it up.  “First, note the slash marks on the wrists.  I say slash marks because that’s what your husband called what she did.  There are two kinds of cuts when one wants to commit suicide this way.  Quick or slow.  Slow the marks are very even across the inner wrist… Fast usually takes a slight dip toward the body to the inside.”  Oscar stopped when he saw Judith had closed her eyes.  “I’m sorry.  Does this bother you?”

“No.  Please, go on.”  She opened her eyes again.  “I need to hear this.”

Oscar point to the cuts.  “These marks go away from the body to the inside – outward instead of inward like she would if she had cut herself.  And they’re deep.  No hesitation like you my might expect from a thirteen year old… But the hands so tightly clenched was the real puzzler.  My nephew and I thought maybe it was some sort of odd contraction that didn’t release after rigor.  On closer examination I discovered the skin is actually adhered together.  The composition is a cyanoacrylate compound.”

“What’s that?”

“Super glue.  All five fingers on the right hand, but the index finger on the left hand was left free… Only the other three fingers and the thumb were glued down.  All probably done post-mortem.”

“Wait a minute.  She was pointing with her right hand.”

“She was.”

Backing away from the table, Judith stared at Forsythia and shook her head.

“You see, your husband saw the photo I have upstairs of the Shasta brothers, one brother pointing to other, indicating his complicity in killing him.  Anyway, initially I thought he just wanted to capture the essence of his daughter as another tool to control your emotions.  When he saw the photo of the Shasta brothers and I told him the story, he couldn’t take any chances.  Just maybe, in his sick, twisted mind, he thought she could only extend the one free finger on her left hand. By placing you to her right, you would be implicated.”

“So how did she extend her finger?”

Oscar covered Forsythia, completely this time.  “The soul is not physical.  The Native Americans believed when we took their pictures we were stealing their souls… But to be precise, we don’t steal it… We just see it.  My particular skill extends to that transition period after we die… Forsythia revealed to us her anger at the one who drugged her, placed her naked body into a bathtub…”

“And sliced her wrists.”

“No, Mrs. Defries.  You know as well as I, your husband didn’t slice Forsythia’s wrists…  You did.”

Like a sheet snapping in the wind, Judith straighten her stance and her face froze, not saying a word.

“Your daughter wasn’t angry at him for slicing her wrists… She was angry at him for the years of abuse and molestation he exacted on her in life.  That hideous man would drug her and take advantage of her lifeless state to perform his unspeakable acts… until all that was left of her was a burnt out shell of a girl… who wanted to die.”  Oscar stood very close to Judith, but never raised his voice.  “Did she beg you to do it because she didn’t have the will to do it herself?  Or was she just so intoxicated she couldn’t raise the blade?”

“How did you know?”

“The camera doesn’t see, Mrs. Defries… I do.”  Oscar turned away and put his hands on the table where Forsythia lay.  “Someone as depressed as she must have been would have never been angry at the one who ended her suffering.  To be subjected to the years of abuse while you were out of the picture, that angered her more than anything.”

“What are you going to do, Mr. Gruel?”

“Me?  I’m not going to do anything.  Your husband will suffer for the crimes he committed even if he didn’t actually kill her… And you?  Well, you’ll have to answer to your own conscience over the course of time.”  Oscar gazed over to a photo hanging on the wall opposite the doorway.  “Do you see that photo over there?”

The image of a young man cradling the body of an older, emaciated man captured Judith’s eye and she studied it, realizing the young man looked much like Oscar.  “Is that you?”

“Yes,” he replied and turned away from the photo.  “And the man I’m holding is my father.”

The frail little man looked into the eyes of his son, bearing a soft and contented gaze to his holder while one arm draped across the front held his son’s arm.  His open mouth looked to be saying something or perhaps breathing deeply, but remained in character with the look of love toward his son.

            Judith smiled.  “He seems to love you very much.”

            “He did… And I loved him… But he was quite dead when that photo was taken.”  Oscar took a deep breath.  “You see, at his request, I injected him with a very potent anesthetic… and then enough morphine to have killed a man twice his size.”

            Judith put her hands over her mouth.

            “He couldn’t live with the voices in his head any longer.  So in a lucid moment he begged me to end his suffering.”  Oscar turned once again to the photo.  “I took that photo after his death in the hopes it would show he loved me for what I did… Most of the time it works… Sometimes… even nearly sixty years later… it still haunts me… Take comfort in the look in your daughters eyes… a look of anger at your husband, not you…. Because it will haunt you when you least expect it."

 *I don’t even think I blinked, and I now found myself in a cabin with a roaring fire going in the fireplace and a cup of something hot setting on the end table next to me on the couch. I gazed around the cabin… its ceiling and walls supported by rough hewn timbers and decorated with wicker chairs and early American tables. On the walls, pictures of forest scenes, flowers, and animals could have been just as easily windows to the outside world. The only light in the room came from the fireplace and about three hurricane lamps burning here and there. A staircase cut across a wall in the area that served as a kitchen, I’m assuming leading to the upstairs bedroom. I big window near the front door and two smaller windows in the main area all showed nothing but a black sky outside.*

 *“Hello?” I stayed seated on the couch, probably because I assumed I still bore the wounds of surgery. “Is there anyone here?”*

 *A woman’s voice carried from upstairs. “I told you, I was going to bed.” It wasn’t a voice I knew.*

 *“Nicky?”*

 *“Who the hell is Nicky? Are you dreaming again?”*

 *Not in the mood for another confrontation resulting in nothing but more questions, I avoided an answer and walked to what I hoped was the front door. Once opened, it revealed a darkness reminiscent of what I experienced minutes before in the other reality. I couldn’t see the moon, but an uneasy light put outlines on objects in the area. A stone path strewn with patches of perennials led to a small dirt lane along which was parked a vehicle I had never seen before. I couldn’t tell you the make or the model… I just remember red… Red, probably the only color to stand out in the dark.*

*My mind shuttered on and off as I moved from one scene to the next, nothing being truly tangible or even meaningful. The darkness permeating each reality connected them into one greater truth. No sense of future. Tomorrow would be another pointless exercise in futility in yet another meaningless series of events. I had been cast in a showcase of ethereal vignettes, an actor playing a role, sleepwalking through each scene without the benefit of improvisation… only strict adherence to the script.*

*To avoid the inevitable I knew I must escape the bounds of this dreamlike state, if only for a few moments. Otherwise I would be stuck in a loop… a never ending loop if I failed to take control of the play. I would be bathed in darkness forever unless I found a way to find the light.*

**BRAINWAVE**

Copyright 1988

**JUNE 28, 2058**

**Pontiac, Chicago**

 The cocktail lounge across from the U.S. Medical Research Center bustled with off-duty medical personnel as well as a few civilians looking for free medical advice amongst the researchers. Most of them got used to it. Research doctors became easy targets for people seeking answers to their loved one’s various diseases and maladies because private doctors and hospitals would not even look at you if did not have medical bonds bought from birth.

 Nursing their drinks at the bar, Dirk Carle and Leah Hawk brooded over what they considered a loss at a conference earlier that day with the Surgeon General. "She didn't even listen to us," Hawk said, taking the day the hardest. "It was as if we hadn't even spoke."

 "Until today I thought Perez was a sensible man. But he folded to the old lady just like that," Carle snapped his fingers.

 "He shocked me, too. I think he was kissing up to Arie."

 "Think so?"

 "Has to be. Just six months ago he was on our side, especially when we opposed the OICU program." Hawk took another big swig of her drink. "I guess he was kissing up to someone else then."

 "You know what I think?" Carle said, his speech a trifle slurred. "I think the old lady is getting pressure from the Capitol because of all the Federal funding going into those stations."

 "I don't get what you're saying."

 "Up until last year when they set up the facility in the OICU Station, there were probably seven thousand level five comatose subjects nationwide. Nobody gave a damn and the entire program was in danger of being scratched. But now you put six hundred of them in a space station, and the whole world wants to put in their two cents and the program finds they can get all the money they need to function. They sift a few dollars out for the station, and the rest goes to all the others still down on the ground."

 "Do you really think people didn't care about the subjects before the launch?"

 "Most people don't want to think about it. Hell, half the population still thinks keeping a human brain alive without the body is science fiction." Carle took another drink. "Maybe it should be."

 "But when Perez's wonder boy… what's his name?"

 "Auner."

 "Yeah, Auner. When he told us what he wanted to with them. God! I thought I had heard it all. I mean, I think we can keep them alive. But Jesus!"

 "See, and I always thought you were a bleeding heart liberal."

 She stared at Carle and grinned. “You know I never saw any advantages to keeping these things alive. I just didn’t buy into your argument that this was a liberal plot to keep fetal stem cell research alive.”

 “You oversimplify. Both sides of the aisle want this program to work. The rightwing conservatives can claim to cherish life and the leftwing libs can create a huge bureaucracy in the program. Meanwhile, sensible people live a nightmare.”

 Dirk could barely see as he walked through the dark rooms of his home. Walking through the house half-asleep presented him a few obstacles, and yet he couldn’t bear the idea of turning on a light. Once he focused on the light on his wall monitor and the words "CALL! I.D. BLOCKED," flashing center screen, he managed to get to it without further tripping.

 Easing himself into his chair behind the desk, Carle reached over to the pad on the desk and connected the call. Instantly the image of Dr. Perez faded onto the screen. "Well, well, well,” Carle said. “Good evening Dr. Perez. What can I do for you, seeing as how it's three-o'clock in the morning?"

 "Sorry, I didn't know who else to call. I need you to be ready to leave for OICU by six-hundred hours."

 "What the hell are you talking about?"

 "God damn it, Dirk! I don't have time to explain! Just get your ass up here on the 07 Shuttle!"

 "Listen, Perez! I don't have to do a God damned thing since my re-up paperwork hasn't been processed yet. So if you want me to do this and don't want to lose me for the next four years, you better tell me what the hell you want with me."

 Perez closed his eyes and wiped his brow with a paper towel. "I'm sorry, Dirk. We're under a lot of pressure up here. There's been a problem and I need a qualified neurologist up here right away."

 "I don't get it. I'm in micro-neurology now. Send Durgess. He's your chief neurologist."

 "He's already up here... or was. Look, I need you to go up. You were a neurologist for six years until this level five CP stuff came about. Now, I can't order you to go because I know your position in this matter.... But I am asking you as someone who was once your friend.... Please."

 "There is another reason, isn't there."

 After a short-term silence from Perez, he closed his eyes and answered, "Yes. The Surgeon General told me she wanted you up there now.... You evidently impressed her yesterday and she says if I can't get you to come up here and check us out... I have to scrub the whole program."

 "Just what the hell is going on?"

 "I can't tell you over the phone. I would if I could, but the whole thing is classified. Just tell me if you'll do it, yes or no."

 Carle could think of a hundred reasons why he should say no, not the least of which involved the unplugging of six-hundred level five comatose patients. But the same thing that made him want to say no also stuck in his crawl and made him say, "Okay. I'll go."

 "Thanks, Dirk."

 "I also want Leah Hawk to go with me. She's not sympathetic to your cause, either. But she'll do the best job she can."

 "I'll call her. You just be at Midway at six hundred. I'll see you about six-thirty.

The small capsule spun slowly at the same rate as the massive space station it was approaching. Aboard the capsule, Doctors Carle and Hawk each saw the space station first hand for the first time. Under different circumstances they might have found this thrilling, watching the station stand steady while the Earth twirled in a circle behind it.

 “Thanks,” Hawk said sarcastically to her capsule companion. “I really wanted to fly around the planet at the crack of dawn.”

 “Hey, if I’m going up to save a program I vehemently oppose, I want my best friend at my side compromising her principles, too.”

 In a matter of minutes the capsule lightly bumped the docking base and locked together with the station. Over the speaker inside the capsule, a voice said, “Docking completed. Please exit the capsule carefully.”

 "I sure am glad to see you," Dr. Perez said to Carle as he escorted the two new arrivals down a corridor. "Were you able to review any of the material on the way up here."

 "Not exactly. The disks they gave us at Meigs only covered the procedure and some problems Dr. Auner and his staff encountered last week."

 "Raul," Hawk said directly to Perez, "how come no one at the meeting yesterday said anything about the problems Auner has already had."

 "Believe me, I have been asking Auner that myself."

 "Well," Carle asked. "What was his answer?"

 "I'm more curious," Leah interrupted, "what kind of problem they would have that Arie has you bring up Dirk and me to bale you out. That's sort of like having John Brown help the South save slavery."

 Dr. Perez answered without skipping a beat, "It's your opposition to the program that makes her believe you'll do everything you can to protect the subjects."

 "So what happened? Where are Auner and Durgess?"

 "Auner is in his quarters getting some rest.... Durgess had to be flown back to Chicago City."

 Carle and Hawk said in unison, "Why?"

 Perez stopped at a door and grabbed the handle. "He had a severe psychotic break." He opened the door and motioned the other two through. "Doctors."

 The door shut and each of them walked halfway around the cylindrical "floor" and stepped down through a tube into another chamber. In the chamber were several people seated at a control panel and watching their subjects beyond a sheet of glass.

 "Remember, we're in zero gravity now," Perez told Carle and Hawk, "so always make sure you keep one foot on the floor."

Carle barely paid attention to what Perez said as he studied the array of black domes on the other side of the glass. Each laid about two meters from the others around it, and they covered an area large enough to hold six hundred of the domes. "One per dome, right."

 "Uh, yes," Perez answered. "You can open and close the domes with the red and green buttons on the side of each dome. Once open, the direct light over the dome will shut down. Any light you need to have for operating you'll have to get through your own infrared lenses. You do have them, right?"

 "Of course. I know the protocol for this facility better than you."

 "Great!"

 "Which one did they hook up?"

 A technician at one of the panels replied, "Number Sixty-Six. Its the third dome from the far left in the fourth row."

 "Carle looked at Hawk and shook his head. "Are you ready?"

 "No. But let's do this?"

 Both Carle and Hawk walked through the doorway, stopped a second and waited for the decontaminant particles to be sprayed on them by a dim light wave, and stepped into the dome room.

 Dr. Hawk opened Dome 66, which immediately shut down the spotlight shining down on it from above. The round top slide back to reveal the enigma inside... a mass of fiber optic strands stretching from the bottom of the container to many points on the subject, the remains of what was once a human being – a human brain.

 "What kind of brain wave activity are you getting?" Hawk asked the control room as she switched on her infrared contacts.

 "It's currently above normal," a technician answered.

 "So each one of these fiber optic strands is connected on one end to the system," Carle observed, "and the other to the superconducting sensors attached to the brain itself."

 "Yes," Perez answered. "The process is not unlike the thought sensors used in virtually reality interfacing and in aircraft control helmets."

 "But Auner hoped to communicate with the subjects. Is that what went wrong?"

 "Not exactly. What I want you to check is to see if the superconductors are placed in the proper areas of the thought processing centers of the brain. You don't have to know what order the wires are in, just so they are connected to the logic centers. The computer can sort out the patterns and the order of succession. We were afraid maybe Auner had attached some of the connectors to the parts of the brain active during REM sleep."

 "That's ridiculous," Leah replied. "Dreams come from the same part of the brain where thoughts come from. It's just that when we sleep dreams are how the entire brain tries to process all the information it's been fed."

 "Why did you think that, Raul?" Carle inquired. "What is it you guys are afraid of now?"

 "You have a fully functioning monitor in the lid of the dome," Perez said as if neither Doctor had spoke. "I want you to examine it physically, and then run digiscans of the cerebral cortex to check for any abnormalities present."

 While everyone remained so intent on watching the action in the dome room, no one noticed Dr. Auner came through the entry tube. After a couple of moments watching what Carle and Hawk at work, Auner asked, "Who is that in the there?"

 "Dr. Auner!" Perez spoke, surprised to see him in there. "You shouldn't be in here. You need your rest."

 "I'm fine. But what the hell is going on here? Who is in there? This is my project."

 "That is Dr. Carle and Dr. Hawk..."

 "Carle and Hawk! They’re the fools who spoke out against this whole program." Auner grabbed for a microphone. "Carle, get the hell out of their! Leave the dome alone!"

 Two men along with Dr. Perez grabbed Dr. Auner and pulled him away from the control panel. Carle and Hawk continued working as if they heard nothing.

 Perez looked directly into Auner’s eyes. "Doctor, I will confine you to your quarters if you try to disrupt the procedure again."

 "But this is my project!"

 "It was your idea, but this is a government project. Something went wrong with your procedure and Carle and Hawk are going to see if they can figure out what happened."

 "But I know what happened. Nothing went wrong. The response the CP made was a normal response after being unconscious for such a long time."

 "Dr. Auner! Durgess is in serious condition!"

 "It's because he didn't understand what was happening."

 "I don't think you understand what's happening."

 "But they're against this whole project. They'll sabotage it!"

 "No they won't. They're here to help."

 Carle's voice broke in over the speaker, "Dr. Auner, I need to ask you something."

 Reluctantly, Dr. Perez allowed Auner to have the microphone. Auner's tone seemed far from cooperative. "What do you want, Carle?"

 "You have several readouts monitoring pain. Why is that? The brain itself feels no pain. Why would you need sensors?"

 “Don’t you think I already know that? The subject itself told us it was in pain, so we attached sensors to that area of the brain receiving pain signals.”

 Carle stood straight and looked back at Auner. “The subject told you?”

 “Yes.” Auner looked at the floor. “We were, uh, successful.”

 “You don’t sound too happy about it.”

 Perez broke in, “It’s the success that has raised a sea of questions.”

 Leah acted a bit more distressed than Dr. Carle. "There are no readings on those pain sensors. Have you figured out why the subject said it was in pain?"

 "Uh," Auner struggled with the answer, "we think we have not have accurately set the parameters in the program configuration."

 "Damn it, Doctor! You know that's not true!" Dr. Hawk remained excited. "The reason is because the brain is still active. It’s exactly like a patient who loses a leg, but still feels pain in toes that don’t exist. The only difference is now the entire body is creating the phantom pain."

 "You don't know that for sure."

 "It's the only answer!"

 Dr. Carle was in complete agreement. "No, she's right. It's the only thing that can account for the abnormal EEG activity."

 “But it’s impossible,” Auner continued to assert. “The subject has been unconscious too long.”

 “I’m gathering the pain level is the main focus of your problem."

 “Correct,” Perez answered. “It has always been contended the level five CPs were in no pain for exactly the reasons Dr. Auner has said. Now our first contact with a subject reveals that all may be inaccurate.”

“I’m assuming you tried morphine.”

“Yes, with no results.”

Carle and Hawk both dropped their heads and shook them back and forth. “Morphine blocks the pain sensors,” Hawk said. “In this case you have nothing to block.”

“I don’t follow you.”

“God damn it, Perez,” Carle said, “the brain only thinks it’s in pain. You can’t block that with morphine.”

Hawk took hold of a clear tube running into the brain and studying. “Is this an IV?”

“Yes,” Auner answered.

“Add a drip of ZAQ247. That’s an endorphin derivative."

 "I know what ZAQ247 is. Won’t it have the same ineffectiveness as the morphine?"

 Carle looked back at Perez. “Do you want my help, or not?”

"Just key in the name and the dosage you want at your panel in the dome."

 As soon as Carle set the rate for the chemical being induced into the subject, the EEG readings immediately tapered off to a nominal level.

 Dr. Hawk asked, "What was Sixty-six's name."

 "What do you mean?" Perez inquired.

 "When he was a man... He had a name! What was it?"

 Dr. Perez looked to one of the technicians who began frantically searching through the computer file. Finally, "I have it! Number 66... Daniel Ligget."

 "Dr. Hawk," Perez relayed, "the name of the man was Daniel Ligget.

 Preparing to complete what the others had started, Dirk glanced at Leah carrying a dubious expression on his face much like hers. "Are you ready?"

 "No. But let's do this."

 Dr. Carle positioned the cursor on the screen on the interface option and started to drop his finger on the return keypad, but stopped. He looked up at the others in the control room. "No one... and I mean, no one is to speak during this next phase! Any confusion could put the poor fellow into traumatic shock, as if he's not already in enough distress."

 All heads nodded in some sort of agreement... even Auner.

 Carle dropped his finger and the air immediately carried a high pitch whine accompanied by a sound not unlike buzzing bees. Gradually, another sound filter through... a sound almost reminiscent of a human groan.

 "Daniel.... Can you hear me?" Carle kept his voice low and soft, knowing he was addressing a very sick patient. "Daniel... My name is Dirk Carle... Can you hear me?"

 There was no response.

 "Daniel, I am a Doctor. I am here to help you."

 Slowly, as the other sounds began to pulse and fade in and out, (but never completely,) something else tried to come through. Simultaneously, the voice synthesizer and the video display relayed these words, "Can... hear…"

 A tear started to form at the corner of Dr. Hawk's eye.

 His own heart starting to pound more rapidly now, Carle prepared to speak again. "You are Daniel, right?"

 "Yes... Daniel..."

 Dr. Carle looked into the camera lens above the monitor. "Can you see me?"

 "Help me!!... Pain!!..."

 "I have tried. We gave you a pain reducer, but I don't know if it will help much."

 "Difference... Still pain..."

 "Do you know what is causing the pain?"

 "Trying to move… Trying to see… Can’t feel anything?"

 “If you can’t feel anything, why are you in pain?”

 “Not hurt… Not that kind of pain… Are you… God?”

 Carle had to wipe a tear from his own eye as he wondered about the terrible implications of that question. "No... No, I'm not God... I'm just a man like you."

 "Alive?..."

 "Yes, you're alive. Can you see me?"

 "I see many things now… It’s too confusing… It has been dark for so long… Yet, it wasn’t black… Just absent… Now, there are people, numbers, lights, colors… It must be a dream."

 "Never mind. Don't try to see me. We'll just talk."

 "Help me!!... Save me!!..."

 "Save you? Save you from what?"

 "Maybe only God can save me!"

 "What do you want me to save you from? You said you feel pain but it’s not the hurting kind. What other sort of pain is there?"

 There was no answer.

 “Daniel, what is hurting you?”

 “A dark cellar… alone… no sound… no light… nothing… no hope. I remember everything… but I can do nothing… Why am I being punished?”

 “You’re not being punished. Would you rather be dead?”

 “Dead? I’m not already?”

 “No. Your body was dead, but your brain has been kept alive. Apparently when you were sick you signed an agreement to be treated in exchange for participation in this program should anything happen to you? Do you remember that?”

 “I’m not dead?”

 “No.”

 “You lie… If I’m not dead… why am I here?”

 “What do you mean, here? Where do you think you are?

 "...Hell..."

 As the whining sound accompanying Daniel's voice seemed to pulsate even faster, Leah stepped up behind Dirk and grabbed his hand, squeezing it tightly.

 "So lonely… So dark… All these years, no one to talk to…" And then the sounds seemed to be crying. “Oh, God! Am I in hell? Why have you left me here?”

 Dr. Hawk buried her face in Carle's back and uttered a muffled, "Oh, my God!"

 Dr. Carle fought hard to keep focused and forced himself to maintain his composure. He moved the cursor down to an option very seldom used with level five comatose patients... Terminate. Carle took in a deep breath before he positioned his finger over the return key. "Daniel?"

 "Please, save me!"

 "Maybe I can save you." His finger hit the keyboard, and immediately the sound stopped, and all the readings began to degrade. All the plasma, water, and oxygen ceased pumping in and EEG stopped fluctuating. In a little less than a minute the monitor stopped reading anything coming from the CP, or Daniel.

 CP number Sixty-Six, once known as Daniel Ligget, was dead.

 Dirk stood on the balcony of his home staring into the night sky. Leah walked up behind him with a drink in her hand, placing the other on Dirk's back. Her wet hair draped over the bathrobe she wore, while Dirk had yet to change his clothes. "Are you sure you don't want one," Leah asked Dirk, swirling her drink in her hand.

 "No. I should have a sandwich first – even though I'm not hungry."

 "Thanks for letting me use the shower. I felt like I needed to wash something off of me after this morning."

 From a chair further back on the balcony the voice of Dr. Perez cut through in a deep but soft tone. “What the hell was that?”

 “You really don’t know,” Carle said, “do you?”

 “It just doesn’t make sense. The brain itself does not feel pain.”

 “Good God, Raul! Are you that ignorant?” Carle stared off into the maze of the city. “Daniel wasn’t in physical pain. It was something completely different.”

 Dr. Hawk wrapped her towel around her neck and said, “Abandon all hope all ye who enter in.”

 Dr. Perez sputtered in the darkness. “Are you quoting Dante to me? I’m surgeon, not a fucking literature major or a philosopher.”

 “Leah is right,” Carle said. “Daniel felt the pain that mankind fears the most… the fear of total isolation… and in his case, also the removal from God… which is the definition of Hell.”

 “We’ve revived comatose patients before. I don’t remember anyone talking about being in Hell. On the contrary, many said they thought they were in Heaven.”

 Carle looked at Hawk. “Did you find out what Daniel suffered from to put him into the hospital in the first place?”

 “Yes. He fell from a construction site while he was working on an antenna. Broke his neck, his back, collapsed his lungs, shattered his legs.”

 “But I’ll bet the brain was intact.”

 “He landed feet first.”

 “His body is what put him in an unconscious state. I doubt he was ever really in a coma. Once the brain was removed from his broken body it probably was fully functional within days, if not hours. The rest of that time he wondered why the whole world had shut him out. He said it himself… No black, no white, no sound… just his own fears and major loneliness.”

 Leah took a sip of her drink and stared out across the town. "What about the thousands of them still here in the U.S.?"

 Perez answered, "Arie says they're working on it. But they have to get the approval from Congress since it was them who made us maintain the subjects in the first place."

 “They may not all be like Daniel,” Carle said. “But I would hook up Auner’s fucking machine to the rest of the CP-5s and find out.”

 “That’s going to take time and money. Congress has to approve it.”

 Leah swirled around her drink and took a big swallow. "Maybe if they knew what we know…"

 "If they knew what we know," Dr. Carle said, his eyes still closed, "they wouldn't sleep at night."

 *The darkness could not hide everything. Even in the night shadows I could make out leaves, and stones, and the movement in the grass, likely indicating the presence of spiders or beetles.*

*I walked toward the car, wondering if there was a pack of cigarettes tucked in the visor as I normally did. If it was, in fact, my car they should be there. But the pattern of rocks in the path distracted me momentarily. It was not a solid path, but rocks poured onto the grade. And yet, the pattern repeated itself over and over… a wave of pea stones followed by a strand of white rock accompanied by larger flat rocks shaped like puzzle pieces that fit perfectly… and it starts over.*

*My curiosity with the rocks ended with a greater curiosity on gazing once again at the car in the drive. No longer the solid red car, it now only had a couple strands of red swept through the side panels. And I did recognize this car. I now faced the car of my earliest memories as a child… A 1957 Rambler.*

*The voice of my father startled me. “Where are you going this late?” My father has been dead for eight years.*

*“I was,” my voice was no longer my voice, but instead that of a young boy, “just going to get my… my…” A young boy of five years of age could not be retrieving cigarettes… even if there were any in the car. “My ball.”*

*“There’s nothing out here. Your ball isn’t here. Do you see your ball?”*

*“No. It’s dark.”*

*“Of course, it’s dark.”*

*“Father,” I asked as I stared at his face, hidden by the shadows of the night, “why is it so dark here?”*

 *“Are you afraid of the dark?”*

 *“There are things in the dark that scare me.”*

 *“Those things… they’re in the light too. We don’t fear them as much in the light… But we should…”*

**When a Tree Falls…**

Copyright 2006

“Gargoyles are eating the hors d’oeuvres.”

Aunt Millie never missed one of Grandpa’s dinner parties, even when her brain operated within nominal limits. When Uncle Bart still walked the Earth he kept her grounded in reality. But following his passing she became free to meander through existence, making curious observations about Gerald Ford and mistaking the Haskell brothers for medieval winged creatures of the night.

“I understand you’re working up in the city,” Sophie, my aunt (by marriage), said as she reached around me at the bar and grabbed a jar of olives. “What are you doing?”

“I’m working at Hammerschlag and Schmidt,” I replied as I leaned back and tried to keep my drink upright.

“Is that a law firm?”

“No, they’re corporate consultants. I didn’t go to law school.”

“Really? I thought you went to Riverside.”

“I did, but not the law school.”

Sophie’s husband, Uncle Dexter, came up on the other side. “Hey, Gavin. What’s cooking?”

“Nothing much. Just trying to relax before supper.”

“I hear you. The old man is definitely in the mood for a crowd tonight. There are people here from the all sides of the family, plus a lot of associates and their ‘significant others’,” he said as he made parenthetic gestures with his hands.

“Really?” I pulled the drink to my mouth but just wet my lips. “I haven’t seen Grandpa tonight. Have you?”

“Yeah, he’s been hanging around some guy I’ve never met before. I think your grandpa and that guy’s father used to do business.” Dexter reached around me and tapped Sophie on the shoulder. “Come on, Soph. There’s someone you need to talk to.”

Dexter and Sophie shouldn’t be confused with the fringe elements in the family. Both of them gave you a welcome sense when they were around. Still, I was glad they left when they did. Conversations with them tended to be question and answer sessions. The only problem this created was that now the bar was open again and someone else would likely zero-in on one of the chairs next to me.

 As a boy I enjoyed the family gatherings at Grandpa’s house. Each generation comprised an echelon that gravitated together – adolescents, middle aged, and seniors, the teenage to mid-twenties group being auspiciously absent. Max, my cousin, and I always joined forces, staying aloof to the others of our age but not completely ignoring them. Max had three favorite words that he never hesitated in using during any of our outings – “I dare you…” The only boy in our group that had ever been yelled at by Grandma was Max. The things he did made him Max, whether it be the time he threw fire crackers into the horse stables, or traipsed mud through the drawing room during a recital, or the day he tossed Cousin Madelyn into pond while she still wore her Easter dress. In fact, on her deathbed Grandma deliriously ranted about people and events, some of which we didn’t have a clue about, but one phrase kept coming back – “No, Max. No.”

The empty seat next to me became the target of Uncle Luther (at least I think he’s an uncle) who put his arm around me the way he might around an old army buddy – if he had been in the army. “Young Gavin,” he started as always, “how *has* the world been treating you?”

“Fine.”

“What are you doing these days?”

“I’m a research assistant at Hammerschlag and Schmidt in the city.”

“Really? How excellent for you! I suppose that’s a good way to get your foot in the door, so to speak.”

“Well, since this is my first job out of college I figure I have a lot of opportunities to get a grip on my options.”

Luther raised his index finger to the bartender who immediately mixed a Scotch and soda. “I wouldn’t know about that. The old grind, so to speak, has never been my forte, as it were. But I’m sure that you have your father and grandfather’s business sense – whatever that is.” The bartender brought Luther his Scotch. “How’s your mother?”

“As good as can be expected.”

He sipped his Scotch and pulled out a cigarette. “You know, I’ve always intended on going up there to see her. But it’s the damnedest thing – my social schedule just never seems to coincide with visiting hours and all that. The next time you see her give my best, will you?”

“Sure, Luther.”

“Damned shame. You’re mother and father were such a lovely couple. I was always jealous.”

“Really?”

“Oh, to be sure. I think I was still at Riverside when they met. Your father was already a full partner at the firm. But I still struggled with the point of my life. You know, all that mishmash about what I was going to do and how I was going to do it.” He lit his cigarette and took a hard drag on it, hands free, while he picked up his drink with one hand and pocketed his Zippo with the other. “And then,” with the cigarette still between his lip, “it all fell into place in one evening. It was during midterms that I needed a break from studying, which I loathed by the way, and sought the attentions of one my more recent conquests. We parked along a barren stretch of road north of the bay, and while we were making hot and sweaty love to each other I suddenly realized that I had never bought a car.”

A laugh escaped from me. “Who’s car did you have?”

“Oh, I had a car. But I had never bought one. They were always given to me by my father or my grandmother, may she burn in hell. I mean, here I am, balling the brains out of a beautiful redhead in the back seat of my Jag, and all I can think about is that I have never paid money for a car. How bizarre is that?”

I tilted my head and raised an eyebrow.

“I suppose if I had bought the damned thing I might have been concerned about the stains we were making on the seats. But as it was I couldn’t have cared less. Now, this would make most people rethink their whole lives. But not me. Instead, a week later I went to dear old Dad and told him that I needed a new car because I had really outgrown it and the back seats were beginning to look tacky.”

I waited while he puffed and swigged. “And?”

“Within days I was driving a Benz. I dropped out of school that same semester and went to Tuscany for a few months.”

“Did you ever finish?”

“Why?” Luther looked around and saw someone that caught his eye and he mouthed *hello.* “Excuse me, dear boy. There is someone I am dying to talk to.”

Most of the stories told at Grandpa’s parties were those one hears at any family gathering, I’m sure. Very few of them do I actually remember happening, and yet I’ve heard them so often that I feel as if I had been there when the plot of the story unfolded – save the one I had just heard. There were a few that I remember happening and one in which I was involved. I sat at the end of the table the day that my cousin, Alta, was asked if there was anything she needed, to which she abruptly fountain vomited onto the dining room table, ending dinner for everyone – except Aunt Millie. I was the ball boy the day my father and Uncle Bart played a couple sets of tennis, and Bart’s racquet slipped from his hands on a hard swing, killing one of Grandpa’s peacocks that wandered into the court. And I was with Max the day that he walked up to Grandpa and asked to borrow his .45, and Grandpa opened his coat and pulled out a revolver with a nine inch barrel, handing it to Max. “Don’t shoot off your foot.” Afterwards we went to the pond and shot catfish. I think Max and I were both seventeen. A year later when some men were snagging catfish at the bottom of the pond they dragged up the body of Oneida, our older cousin who had been missing for nearly two years. Imagine my shock when the investigators found a bullet hole from a .45 in her forehead. The medical examiner later told us the gunshot had been inflicted post mortem.

I finally saw Grandpa across the room with the man that Dexter had told me about. I had never seen him before, either. While he dressed much the same as most of the other men at the party, something appeared different in the way he carried himself. Grandpa drank everything in shots or straight with ice. The other cousins and uncles drank mixed drinks of a hard nature –rum and Coke, bourbon and Coke, whiskey or Scotch and soda, and martinis. But this man held a brandy snifter with just about an inch of brandy in it. Grandpa kept brandy in all his bars, but usually only the women drank it.

As I crossed the room to pay my respects to Grandpa, a duty I never shirked on any visits to the house, Aunt Millie stopped me about midway and started prattling on about something. “They never told me that the summer theater closed down in West Village. I went there just two days ago and there was a huge sign across the front that said ‘Under New Management’. Are they going to reopen it again?”

“Aunt Millie, the summer theater closed down seven years ago. A used car dealer bought the building from the city, and he just sold out to another used car dealer.”

“Oh, Garret, I don’t think you have your facts straight. Used car dealers don’t put on plays.”

“I’m Gavin, Aunt Millie. Garret was my father.”

“I know that. It’s just that you two look so much alike, you could be brothers.”

“Excuse me, Aunt Millie. I have to talk to someone.”

“Sure, sure. I’ll chat with you later, Garret.”

Grandpa and the stranger disappeared in the time that Aunt Millie displayed her dementia. I guess I should have kept an eye on them, but I didn’t want to be rude to Millie. She couldn’t help what was happening to her. But I’m sure I’m not alone in anticipating with fondness the day she has to be put away once and for all.

 I thought that the two men may have departed to the balcony that overlooked the garden. Being early October the air would just be cool enough to make it pleasant as opposed to the smoke-filled air inside. Even if Grandpa wasn’t out there, it would be a nice break.

 On opening the double doors to the balcony I caught a glimpse of a young woman, smoking a cigarette and staring at the garden. “I’m sorry,” I said before I started to retreat. “I was looking for my grandfather.”

 “He’s not here, Gavin.”

 I recognized the voice – and then again I didn’t. Her blond hair flowed over her shoulders and her figure seemed tailored to the dress which stood with her. But she kept her face away from me, almost as if she didn’t want to be seen. “Cordelia?”

One of our more distant cousins and not as sissified as most of the other giggling girls, Cordelia kept tabs on Max and me, frequently joining in when we explored the pond behind Grandpa’s house or played tennis at his three-court complex. While all the girls were required to wear dresses at these functions, Cordelia’s usually looked like the uniforms she wore to school, and sometimes that’s exactly what it was. Occasionally when we went swimming in the pond, Cordelia stripped down to her underpants and shirt, which when we were younger didn’t seem any more alluring than regular clothes. But Aunt Millie caught her once and scolded her shamelessly, describing some sort of fictitious fish that could “ruin you for life.” We had no idea what she meant.

 “I wasn’t sure you’d remember me,” she said to me, only half looking back my direction.

 “Remember you? How can I forget you?”

 She eventually turned to face me, and while I knew that she was who she said she was, I could only see faint remnants of the Cordelia in my past. Now her presence quickened my heart rate and breathing. “So how have you been?” she asked and flipped her hair to one side.

 “Good. Good. I’m good.”

 “Did you finish school?”

 “Uh, yeah – just last spring. I, uh, didn’t know that you even know I went.”

 “Grandpa wrote me every Christmas. And Aunt Sophie used to send me cards every once in a while. You’re quite the topic of conversation.”

 “I don’t know about that. I don’t think Grandpa is too happy about me going to work for someone other than the firm.”

 “Are you kidding? I think he respects that much more because you did that. What’s the name of that place?”

 “Hammerschlag and Schmidt.”

 “Aunt Sophie told me just now that your Grandpa carries a picture of you and him and brags about you making it on your own.”

 “Well, I haven’t exactly made it yet.”

 “Are you married? Engaged? Anything?”

 “No. No, I haven’t even got a girlfriend right now. I kept in touch with Alice Fernwood for a few years while I was in school, but we just couldn’t seem to keep the spark going, you know.”

 “Yes, I know.”

 “How about you?” I had already seen her left hand and the grove where a ring should be.

 “I was married – for a while. But it, uh,” she rubbed her ring finger, “just didn’t work out. We divorce just last spring.”

 I stepped closer to Cordelia and laid my hand on her shoulder. “I’m very sorry. But any man who doesn’t cherish you has got to be an A number one asshole – a lot like Uncle Luther.”

 We both laughed and she took a drag off her cigarette. “My god, he is an asshole, isn’t he? You know, before he realized who I was he asked me if I wanted to come with him on his yacht this weekend. And then when I told him who I was he says, ‘You’ve really blossomed into a fine young woman. So how about it? Do you want to go?’”

 “Jesus! I don’t even want to tell you what he and I talked about. And they say Aunt Millie is crazy.”

 “You said it.” She looked around me as if she saw someone. “I heard about Max?”

 “Yeah? I’m surprised that anyone has the ability to even discuss it.”

 “Aunt Sophie told me. I think she’s the only one who can admit it.” She looked away from me and watched the smoke trailing from her cigarette. “You sound bitter.”

 “Only in that he cried out for help and no one would help him – including me.”

 Cordelia laid her hand on my chest. “People do things. We don’t always understand them. But you shouldn’t punish yourself because you didn’t see it coming.”

I kept staring at Cordelia, still taking in her warmth and charm. I wondered how radical it was to think about kissing my cousin, even though we were removed at least three or four times. “You look great, you know?”

 “Thanks.” She looked down and tried to hide the color in her cheeks, but even in the moonlight I could tell. “I never forgot about all the time we spent together on this place. I think I was jealous of Max because you and he were so close. I liked spending time with you because when I did – I never wanted those times to end.”

 “But they did, didn’t they.”

 Cordelia took my hand and held it. “They don’t have to.”

 The door to the balcony opened and Hallis, Grandpa’s butler, stepped through. “Master Winchester, your grandfather would like to speak to you.”

 Grandpa had never summoned me before, even when Max and I wrecked Uncle Bart’s fully restored GTO. “Where is he?”

 “He and Mr. Pentser are in the library.’

 I turned to Cordelia and, still holding her hand, said, “Let’s pick this up again later.”

 “Promise?” her eyes begged.

 “Promise.”

 Grandpa’s library contained every book that he had ever owned since he learned to read. He had Melville, Marlowe, and Milton, as well as Mother Goose. One entire wall was devoted to law books, representing his years as an attorney in Boston. Another wall held the sum of his entire stock of leather-bound corporate reports and financial statements dating back to the post-World War II years. The eye could follow the patterns of the black and gold trim on the spines, the only difference between them being the crude text in the early years and colors that mixed with more and more dust the older they were.

 I entered the library and found Grandpa’s companion of the day, but now Grandpa was absent. “Come on in,” he said as soon as we made eye contact. Normally Grandpa’s friends rose when one of the kids entered the room, likely thinking it showed respect for his influence – although I think his affluence had as much to say about it. But this man remained seated with his arms stretch out across the sofa, the brandy snifter still in his left hand.

 “Where’s my grandfather?”

 “He had to make a call or something. He told me to entertain you until he got back.” He leaned forward and reached out his hand. “Clive Pentser.” We shook hands. “Glad to know you.”

 “Do you?”

 “What?”

 “Do you know me?”

 Pentser laughed and resumed his position on the couch while I found a chair to the right of Grandpa’s prime spot. “You are a witty young chap, I’ll give you that.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a cigarette box, flipping it open and laying it on the coffee table. After he pulled one out he offered it to me. “They’re menthol.”

 “No, thanks.”

 “Probably pretty smart. I’m a whore to these things myself.” He stuck it between his lips and lit it with a lighter that I swear he pulled out of thin air. “Ah,” he said as he pulled in the smoke. “I don’t think I enjoyed them quite so much before the democrats demonized them.”

 “I didn’t realize that smoking was a political issue.”

 “Whatever you want to call them – democrats, liberals, environmentalist wackos. This,” he said as he held up his cigarette, “is the last remnant of freedom. Once they get rid of these you might just as well cut off your dick and start eating Cream of Wheat for every meal.”

 “I used to smoke when I was in school. But now I prefer to breathe in the second-hand smoke from others.”

 Laughing again, “You really are a chip off the old block – a generation removed, that is.” He flicked his ashes into a huge crystal ashtray on the coffee table. “You know, actually I do know you. I’ve been watching you for some time. Oh, not like a stalker watches people. But I have known your grandfather for years, since before your father died. When he died the board of directors at the firm nearly went into a tailspin. Gavin was the only hope they had of keeping the firm alive after your grandfather leaves this world.”

 “What about Bart?”

 “Well, he’s dead, too.”

 “Yeah, but he wasn’t when Dad died.”

 “That’s true. But Bart never had the vision that your grandfather has. Your dad was close. But now I’ve seen someone who may be even closer. Do you understand just how big your grandfather is?”

 “I know he has a lot of assets.”

 “Assets? Dear boy, the checks that rich people get are written by your grandpa. People he cares about ne’er have to worry again. And yet when you graduated from Riverside, you took a job at Hammerschlag and Schmidt.” The smoke from his cigarette swirled around his head. “Hammerschlag and Schmidt – two of the most boring Germans on the face of the Earth. Oh, they know their business – Germans usually get right down to business. But those two old cunts won’t amount to shit if they live to be two hundred. Hammerschlag should have stayed in Cologne where his family ran a successful steel mill, and Schmidt still revels in the days he drank schnapps in Hamburg and saw the Beatles playing the clubs there. Has he patted you on the ass yet?”

 I smiled. “Once or twice.”

 “Come now. I know you’re not gay so that has to annoy you.”

 “How do you know I’m not gay?”

 “Please.” He downed a couple ounces of brandy and puffed the cigarette. “That sweet girl you ran into on the balcony makes you as hard as a turkey neck. So don’t tell me having a sixty year old man slide his bony hand over your ass thrills you in the least.”

 “I just deal with it, the way I would if someone’s grandma sticks her tongue in my mouth in a wedding reception line.”

 Pentser pointed at me. “That’s happened to you, hasn’t it?”

 “More than once.”

 “Do you know why?”

 “I have no idea, other than the fact that they must be horny and not getting it at home.”

 “No.” Pentser leaned forward and put his elbows on his thighs. ”They are horny for something, but it’s not sex. You have something they want. They look at you and think somehow they can turn back the clock and be what they were forty years ago.”

 “And what’s that?”

 “Powerful. Their husbands were once powerful men, but for whatever reason – dead or incapacitated – they can no longer offer the power these women sought. Most women that age grew up in time that didn’t allow a woman to be successful in her own right, so she had to hitch her wagon to some slimy bastard’s star. Now that’s over. But they can relive those days by tantalizing you with the wetness of their own tongues.”

 I should have been suspicious of Pentser’s knowledge and observations – maybe even a little scared. But instead I was fascinated. Still, I had to ask, “How is it you know so much about me?  *Have* you been stalking me?”

 “I don’t have to. I can look in your eye and see the image of what this dysfunctional family has done to you, save your Grandpa – and the girl from the swimming hole. I see the same tired expression that I see every time a man has run the gauntlet of useless relatives, cliché questions, and tired stories. ‘What are you doing now?’ ‘Have you finished school?’ ‘Do you remember when…?’ Usually I look at the man and tell him to run as fast as he can to get away from it. But you,” he sucked on his cigarette, “you’re different. You can turn this to your advantage.”

 “Really?” I started looking around the room – for what I didn’t know.

 “You’re grandfather has many fears about where your family is heading. Most of the men who built the firm are either dead or too old to make a difference. Most of the young men in the family are incompetent.” Pentser’s staring didn’t make me uncomfortable, but it did make me curious. “Occasionally the forest must cleanse itself to make way for new growth.” He started brushes something from thigh. “Your cousin Oneida – what happened to her?”

 “Why are you asking about her?”

 “Because you carry a lot of guilt about her death, and as far as I know you had nothing to do with it.”

 “Nothing to do with it? When they found her body it had a bullet hole in it from a gun I was using to shoot fish in the very pond where she drowned. For a year or two after they found her I wondered what if the medical examiner was wrong, and I shot her while she was swimming in the pond.”

 “But she had been missing for a nearly a year.”

 “Do you think that matters to a boy? As far as I was concerned, when I shot her in that pond that was the day she died.”

 “But your cousin Max was shooting fish with the very same gun. How do you know he didn’t shoot her?”

 “Putting it on Max doesn’t do anything for me. Max would have never let it stick to him.”

 “Which brings us to Max.”

 My eyes locked onto his. “What about Max?”

 “Not a very noble way to die, is it? Drowning on your own vomit – that’s just not the way a Winchester should have died.”

 “I think I will have that cigarette now.”

 Pentser leaned forward and picked up a cigarette from the case almost as if he were a servant following an order. “I struck a nerve, didn’t I?”

 As I took the cigarette, from his hand appeared the lighter that he must have kept up his sleeve. “It’s a sore subject.”

 “Why? Because he died, or because he died before he could tell you it’s not your fault?”

 “Thank you,” I said as soon as I was lit. “Because I knew what he was doing and I didn’t care. So, yes. I guess I wish he could have told me it was okay. As it is I’ll always wonder if I could have stopped him would he still be alive.”

 “You are more than ready to become the patriarch of this rabble. No one else would ever dream of taking any responsibility for anything, even if they had been truly responsible.”

 “I’m not so sure Grandpa will let that happen, things as they are.”

 There seemed to be a long pause, but I’m sure it was only a few seconds. “You really don’t know why I’m here, do you?”

 The double-doors from Grandpa’s office opened a few seconds before his towering frame stepped through, favoring his good leg and carrying a glass of bourbon and ice. He looked at Pentser and said, “Leave us.” Pentser’s shoes barely made noise on the carpet as he left the room. Grandpa walked over to the chair next to me and dropped into it. “Jesus Christ, this doesn’t get any easier.”

 “Are you okay?” I asked, trying to read the pained expression on his face.

 “Hell no! I’m ninety years old and I’m probably going to be dead before the last bird dog I bought. And she’s nine.” He stretched and twisted his head toward me. “What the hell did Shyster tell you?”

 “In a nutshell? That Hammerschlag and Schmidt are gay.”

 “Well, hells bells! You didn’t already know that?”

 “Yeah. But I didn’t go to work for them to sleep with them.”

 “Why did you go to work for them?”

 At first I thought I wasn’t sure how to answer it, but I knew that was wrong. I really thought the answer wouldn’t be understood. Maybe that was wrong too. The answer would be understood – it just wouldn’t be accepted. “Because Hammerschlag and Schmidt offered me the job – and they aren’t related to me.”

 Grandpa grunted and pulled a cigar out of his coat pocket. First he pointed it toward me and asked, “You want one?”

 I held up my cigarette. “No, thanks, Grandpa.”

 Maybe his hand trembled a bit as he lit the cigar, but I was struck by what steadiness this man had considering he’d been alive for World War I, World War II (in which he served as an officer), the Korean War, Vietnam, and both the Gulf Wars. When he was born the telephone was a fresh, innovative idea. Cars were play things for the rich or mechanically inclined. What marvels this man had to have seen! Yet now his only thought was me.

 “You know,” he said as fire shot from the end of his cigar from his puffing it, “your father sat in that chair almost forty years ago and called me a dinosaur. He told me that he couldn’t see himself chained to a chair in the board room for the rest of his life. Had to make his own mark on the world. Do you know what I told him?”

 “The world already has too many marks on it.”

 Grandpa smiled. “He told you that story, huh?”

 “Yes. But he told it with a certain fondness that I didn’t understand at the time.”

 “The point is that he did chain himself to that chair,” he leaned back and looked away, drawing again on his cigar, “and maybe it killed him.”

 I couldn’t stop myself from reaching out to Grandpa and placing my hand on his leg. “Neither you nor the firm killed Dad. I know that. I always did. If you think I didn’t join you because of some feelings I harbor about that, put it out of your mind. Dad died because the woman he loved was turning into piece of furniture.”

 “Be kind to your mother.”

 “I loved my mother. The woman who lies in a bed and stares at the wall up in Canton Hills is just a shell of what was once my mother. I go see her every weekend because I still wonder what she knows and hears. But Dad couldn’t take it. He couldn’t live with her pain. So he lived in the bottle and the dust.”

 Grandpa’s eyes closed tight for a second and opened a little redder. “God damn it.”

 “I blamed a lot of people when I was younger. But never – never did I blame you. You are my rock, Grandpa. I love you. I love you too much to ever work for you.” I pulled back and took a deep breath, not sure what to expect next.

 The smoke that first lingered around Grandpa now drifted toward me as he continued to billow out like a chimney. “You are a goddamned Winchester and there is no mistaking that.” He leaned forward and laid his hand on mine. “I carried your father’s life around with me like a photograph to brag about.” His body swayed back into the chair again. “Now I carry his death like a lead weight around my neck.”

 “Why do you do that to yourself?”

 “Why do you blame yourself for Max’s death?”

 I smashed what remained of my cigarette into the ashtray and grabbed Grandpa’s drink from him. “That’s different.” I tossed back the bourbon, leaving him only a few more swallows and some ice. “I could have helped Max.”

 “I could have helped you father. I could have replaced him on the board, given him extended leave, anything. But Max – Max was just too damn smart for his own good. You know what he said when I told him I was cutting off his allowance? ‘I dare you.’” He finished the rest of the bourbon. “When you’re ninety years old, life takes on new meaning. I wake up every single morning wondering if today is the day. Will the sun rise without a sunset? Am I going to hear the voice of my family again? That’s why I have so many of these damn parties. Sometimes it reminds me how much my family means to me. Other times I look at them and welcome the idea of dying. No matter which way I’m leaning on any particular day, I can’t help but try to repent for everything I’ve done. And if that’s not enough, what deals do I have to make?”

 We both let silence rule the moment… and then it truly hit me. “Who is the Pentser, anyway?”

 The reception hall still reeked of booze and caviar. The Haskell brothers graduated to sucking the meat off chicken wings while they watched a few of my other relatives play cards. I asked one of them, “Have you seen Cordelia?”

 “Who?”

 “Cordelia. Have you seen her?”

 “Yeah,” the other one said. “I think she left a little while ago.”

 “Did she say where she was going?”

 He simply shrugged.

 Dexter, who had only moments before returned to the game at hand, took a tug on his drink and looked up to me. “Congrats, Garrett. Grandpa just told me.”

 “Thanks. We’ll talk about it tomorrow. Right now I just need to find Cordelia.”

 “Oh yeah,” the other Haskell brother said. He nodded his head toward the back of the house. His words came through garbled, like an animal growling while it ate.

 “I didn’t get it,” I replied.

He swallowed and said, “The pond.”

 “What?”

 “She said something about going to the pond.”

 *“Father?” I could still sense his presence.*

 *“I think you were dreaming,” a voice out of the dark spoke. “How are you feeling?”*

 *“Where am I?”*

 *“Still in recovery.” It was the nurse from earlier. Except now she was holding a menu in her hands. “I did manage to get a hold of a menu. Are you hungry?”*

 *They don’t feed you in the morgue… or do they? “When do I get a room?”*

 *“They’re working on it. I think the surgical nurse will want to have you in a room before six, when the doctor starts his rounds. Otherwise she will have some explaining to do… Now, how about food?”*

 *When she mentioned it earlier I practically gagged at the thought of food. But now the pain in my leg had lessened, and I did have some hunger pangs. After all, I hadn’t eaten since yesterday… Or was it the day before? “Can I have bacon and eggs?”*

 *“My good man, you may have whatever you like. Do you want some pancakes besides?”*

 *“No, but a couple pieces of French toast might be good.”*

 *“Good choice. Their pancakes are okay, but I’d go with the French toast too. I’ll bring some blueberry syrup if that’s okay.”*

 *“Sure.” Maybe it wasn’t so bad down here after all. Oh yeah, I was on the third floor. Maybe it’s not so bad up here. I swear as she walked away a glow surrounded her head usually accompanying a woman holding and innocent child. I felt a smile coming on…*

 *…Until the dark figure I had seen before popped up by the door. It gazed at me a moment, then waved his arm over his head and vanished…*

**The Squire of the Bronx**

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 “I did it. Okay? I confess.”

 The police investigator, riding his chair on the back two legs, flipped his cigarette toward an ash tray on the table between him and Ivan Higglestorm. “Did what? You have to say the words. What did you do?”

 “I shot him. I walked up behind him, and I shot him.”

 Another officer standing by the door sighed and stooped to rest both hands on his knees. “Ivan, you know that you’re just saying that because you think that’s what we want to hear.”

 “Who, Ivan?” the smoking detective asked. “Who did you shoot?”

 “Who have you got?”

 “Jesus!” Detective Baxter crammed half a cigarette into the ash tray. “We have been going over this for three hours. And for the life of me, Ivan, I don’t remember even once talking about anybody being shot.”

 Ivan wiped a trace of sweat from his brow, which extended all the way to the back of his head, and straightened a few stray hairs around his ears. “You brought me in here to discuss my crimes. I’ve decided to come clean.”

 This wasn’t the first time that Doug Baxter and his partner, Ben Schatenstien, found themselves questioning Ivan. Ivan didn’t have a criminal record, meaning he had never been convicted of anything. But he could frequently be found at the scenes of various crimes. Schatenstien and Baxter always suspected involvement, but indirectly at worst – maybe he was the lookout, the driver, the distraction, anything but the actual perpetrator. Once Ivan got caught in the middle of a police shootout with a Puerto Rican gang, but all that could be said was that he was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But this time the police dragged him in for possible complicity in a homicide. Baxter and Schatenstien knew Ivan didn’t run that kind of game, but it was just as likely he knew all the players and probably saw the murder go down.

But nobody said anything about anyone being shot.

 “You know what I think, Ivan?” Schatenstien said, still leaning against the door. “I think you’ve seen so much friggin’ crap that you’re not sure exactly why you’re here. Huh? Maybe Bax and I just turn you over to the D.A. and they toss your keester in the hole until they get something worthwhile, and then send you upstate to do some real time for a change. Huh?”

 “Yeah, Ivan. This shit has got to stop. I’ve been showing you pictures of people all afternoon, of which not a single goddamn one was shot.” Baxter leaned forward and folded his arms on the table. “But then you run me this line of bullshit about shooting someone, like it’s some sort of revelation all of a sudden.”

 Ivan squinted. “What do you mean by revelation?”

 Baxter thought for a moment and waved his arms in the air as if trying to swirl an image of his words into view. “A revelation. You know, like something that was, uh, revealed to you.” He snapped his fingers. “Like in the Bible.” As that last phrased rolled out he looked back at his partner.

 Schatenstien straightened his stance and crossed his arms. “Don’t look at me.”

 “You mean like my purpose?” Ivan’s head and eyes rolled around the room in different directions and a smile slowly took control of his mouth. “That’s it. That’s what it was.”

 “What?” Baxter asked.

 “My purpose. I suppose that’s what this is all about. I mean, I discovered my purpose a long time ago.”

 “Okay. I’ll bite. What is your purpose, Ivan?”

 “Oh, that’s a lot more complicated than just telling you about the shooting. I did, as a matter of fact, shoot someone. But that was only a part of it.” Ivan looked into the eyes of each man alternately and smiled once more. “But you don’t even know about the shooting, do you?”

 “What shooting?” Schatenstien asked. “Your old buddy Harvey wasn’t shot.”

 Those words brought Ivan’s hand to his chin as he contemplated them. “This is about Harvey?”

 Both detectives simultaneously replied, “Yes.”

 “I didn’t kill Harvey. Harvey killed himself.”

 Baxter picked up a piece of paper from the table and studied it for a second. “Come on, Ivan. You have to do better than that. The cause of death was,” he began reading aloud, “blunt force trauma to the back of the skull with an object that was covered with metal studs. Subject was struck three, possibly four times with the same object.” He slapped the piece of paper back on the table. “Are you fucking telling me that Harvey committed suicide by hitting himself on the back of the head four times?”

 “I didn’t say he committed suicide. I said he killed himself. There’s a difference, you know.”

 As Schatenstien walked across the room toward the table, he couldn’t stop the smallest urge to laugh, but kept it to a titter. “You’re going to have to explain that one, Ivan.”

 “Well, like Detective Baxter here. He’s been smoking for as long as I have known you guys. He looks as if he’s enjoying it most of the time.”

 Baxter replied, “Yeah, so?”

 “You’re not committing suicide. I mean, you’re not hoping to end your life. But you are killing yourself.”

 Baxter shook his head and forced air through his pursed lips, making an unpleasant noise.

But Schatenstien stayed focused. “Are you trying to tell us that Harvey didn’t want to die, but he caused someone else to bash in his skull?”

 “Indirectly, yes.”

 “Goddamn it, Ivan!” Baxter snapped as he pounded the table. “Will you stop the fucking talking in circles and tell us what happened?”

 Ivan stared at Baxter for a second, and he looked at Schatenstien who nodded. After a moment of gazing at the men and finally at his own hands folded in front of him, Ivan cleared his throat and scooted closer to the table. “Harvey was evil.”

 “What the hell does that mean?” Baxter asked. “All your goddamn friends are scum.”

 “No, when I say Harvey was evil I don’t mean he broke the law. Maybe that was a poor choice of words, too. I should have said, Harvey gave in to evil. And having done that he set in motion a chain of events he couldn’t stop – but somebody had to.”

 The alley behind Lomack’s Pool Hall made the perfect hangout for various individuals of dubious reputation. Lomack didn’t mind because the guys who loitered there never made any trouble for him and usually bought sodas from his machines. And if trouble did find its way into the pool hall, Lomack could rely on the crew out back to help take care of it. They didn’t really belong to a gang, although they did watch out for each other. But almost every one of them could tell a tale of incarceration in some form, either Rikers Island, Sing Sing, or some other “joint” in the vicinity. Some of their names, too, pointed to the various deeds they had committed or the tools they used – Crowbar, Needles, Lifter, and Cutter. But among them were two who had more ordinary names – Ivan and Harvey.

 Harvey McDonnell actually hated his first name. He tried giving himself nicknames, like Fists, Knuckles, Mack, and even just Harv – but none of them ever stuck. Cutter, the only black guy in the group, called Harvey a whigger a couple times, and since Harvey thought it referred to his thick red hair he let it go – but even that one didn’t hang on. As much as he hated it, Harvey was stuck with his own name.

 One rainy Saturday the guys decided to take it inside, as they usually did any other rainy day. But for some reason Harvey wasn’t there. Crowbar said that he thought he’d been arrested, but he didn’t know for sure why – something having to do with some punks from across town. No one was really surprised. Cutter figured he had stomped on the wrong turf in the black neighborhood, Lifter thought it probably had to do with some Latinos Harvey had mouthed off to early in the week, and Needles just laughed and joked that maybe he got caught in a gay bar. Everybody laughed at that prospect.

 “Can you imagine?” Lifter said. “Harvey in a fag hangout?”

 Cutter set his cue stick down. “He’d be walking around like this.” He put one hand on his crotch and one on his butt, and danced around the pool table. “Stay away from me faggot! Stay away!”

 Lifter laughed so hard that he fell on the floor. “Stop it! Your killing me!”

 “Hey, Ivan,” Needles said, “can’t you find out where he is. You know a couple Briscoes, don’t you?”

 “Briscoe?” Cutter asked. “What the fuck is a Briscoe?”

 “A cop. You know, like Briscoe on *Law and Order*.”

 “You’re fucked up. What the fuck you do, go home and watch T.V. before you bang your old lady?”

 “Shit, man. Everybody knows about Lennie Briscoe.”

 “Whatever?” Cutter put his arm around Ivan. “So what about it, Higglebottom? You know any badges?”

 Ivan looked around the room at everyone there, somewhat hesitant and sort of confused. “No more than any of you. I mean, we’ve all been sitting on the other side of that table in the squad room.”

 “That don’t mean I cozy up to them after hours.”

 “Naw,” Needles said, “it ain’t like that. You remember about a year ago when Ivan was in the middle of that shooting in Van Cortlandt Park. A couple of Bronx cops almost got ambushed by a spic gang, and Ivan got caught in the crossfire.”

 Ivan continued to play eye-contact tennis on each man in turn until finally he looked at the clock. “Gee, it’s ten-o’clock. When did you say Harvey got arrested?”

 Crowbar picked up Cutter’s cue stick and handed it to him. “It must’ve been last night.”

 “Well, unless they plan on arraigning him, they’ll probably let him go soon and he can tell us himself. I mean, they’re not going to keep him in jail all weekend unless they have a solid charge.”

 Cutter still had his arm around Ivan. “How do you know they don’t have a solid charge? Fuck it, Ivan. You do know something about this, don’t you?”

 “It’s just a feeling. I doubt he was actually arrested.”

 The exact instant Ivan finished speaking, the front door to the pool hall opened and Harvey came through. When he walked by the counter he cussed a couple times and asked Lomack, “You got any coffee?”

 “I got a fresh pot going now. I’ll bring you a cup when it’s ready.”

 Harvey kept walking without as much as a ‘Thank you’ or anything close. Instead he threw his coat on a table closest to the rest and sat on a stool along the wall. “Fucking pigs.”

 “What happened, Harvey?” Lifter asked.

 He kept it short. “I had to go downtown.”

 Everyone waited but Harvey wouldn’t say anymore. Finally, Cutter crouched down low enough to look up into Harvey’s eyes. “Hey, man. What’s up? You don’t look right.”

 Harvey looked away for a moment and his chin began to quiver. He tightened his jaw but that only made the quivering worse. Everyone closed ranks on Harvey, some of them trying to get him to talk and others just waiting for something to happen – like Harvey having a total breakdown.

 “I had to go downtown,” Harvey said again, “and identify a body.”

 Everyone asked it, but Cutter was the loudest, “Whose body?”

 “My kid brother – Dirk. Fucking cops shot him down by the Triborough Bridge.”

 “Why?”

 “They said he was making a break for La Guardia after he and a couple guys knocked over an OTB on 163rd Street. The other guys started shooting and everything – fucking cops gunned him down like a dog.”

 “What about the other guys?” Lifter asked.

 “They got away. But now all five boroughs are looking for them. They’re dead meat as soon as those goddamn faggots that *you* know,” he looked at Ivan, “find their asses.”

 Ivan stuttered, “Who are you talking about?”

 “The goddamn kike and that dickhead Baxter. They’re probably back at the precinct right now, bragging about blowing my brother away and everything.”

 “They don’t do stuff like that. I mean, if there’s a shooting they’ll probably have to be investigated themselves.”

 “I don’t give a goddamn shit. I’m going to get those assholes,” he started to cry, “if it’s the last thing I do.”

 Cutter put his hand on Harvey’s shoulder. “Hey, man. You should be at home with Gladys. She don’t have your dad anymore to help her through shit like this.”

 “Gladys can go fuck herself. Goddamn bitch never gave a rat’s ass about Dirk or me before. Why should she care now that he’s dead?”

 “She raised you, man. It’s only right. She may not be your mother, but she is Dirk’s, and you know that she’s got to be hurting.”

 “I ain’t doing another goddamn thing until I put them fucking pigs in a grave.”

 Harvey’s car didn’t have power seats, mag wheels, or hub caps for that matter. When the car was new, Harvey’s mode of transportation probably resembled one of the pedal varieties – maybe even one with three wheels. Remnants of a blue vinyl roof still remained, albeit some of the pieces barely hung on and were flipped over to the glue side. And big blotches of white graced the paint job as though little clouds floated across its sky-blue color.

 All afternoon, after he left the pool hall, Harvey sat in his car and stared out the front window. He could have been parked anywhere to get a better view – a park, the river, the Manhattan skyline. But none of those sights would have given him any pleasure or satisfaction. The view out his front window at that moment needed to be the Bronx Police Precinct House.

 At about four-thirty Ivan noticed Harvey sitting in his car and tried to imagine why he would be there, so openly staring at the police station. He didn’t say a word but slowly approached the car, and after staring at Harvey for at least a minute, Ivan tapped on the passenger-side window. Harvey jumped and reached for the ignition key, until he saw that it was Ivan who had tapped on the glass.

 “What are you doing?” Ivan asked.

 Harvey reached over and rolled down the window. “Back at you, dickhead. You scared the piss out of me.”

 “Harvey, you shouldn’t be here.”

 “Why not? It’s a public street. I got a right to be here.”

 “If Ben and Doug see you here they’re going to know that you’re up to something.”

 “Yeah, well, if Benny and Dougie think I’m up to something they can send me to bed without any supper. Until somebody tells me I got to move, I’m staying right here.”

 Ivan opened the door and climbed in the car with Harvey. “Come on, Harvey. Let’s go over to Garibaldi’s and get a plate of linguini. I mean, maybe if you just sit and talk to someone about this you can work some things out, you know?”

 “I am working this out. Those two assholes shot and killed my brother and everything. I ain’t letting them get away with it.”

 “Who do you think you are? Jimmy Cagney? You are not going to kill a cop. You talk about getting away with it? No cop in the five boroughs is going to let you get away with killing another cop. They’ll stop you dead.”

 “I don’t care.”

 “You don’t care about being dead? You’re upset about them killing you brother, but if you do this you’ll be as dead as he is.”

 Louder, “I don’t care!”

 “Well, the least you could do is drive me back to my place.”

 “How the hell did you get down here?”

 “I was walking all over town looking for you. I guess I just lost track of where I was until I saw you in your car. Come on. Give me a lift home. You can be back here in a half hour.”

 Harvey never looked at Ivan again. He started the car, shifted into gear, and drove away.

 The kitchen window of Detective Schatenstien’s brownstone faced the street. The dim light coming from inside gave a silhouette of the man as he sat alone at his table, dipping his fork into a plate and bringing it to his mouth over and over again. Occasionally he broke the rhythm by sipping from a short glass, but after each sip he would return to the previous cycle. The sound of clinking metal to ceramic might have been coming from his place, but it just as easily could have come from a hundred other kitchens also overlooking the street. Other sounds, living sounds, permeated the night air in the neighborhood – babies crying, people shouting, other people laughing, and televisions blasting.

 The light from a match revealed Harvey’s face as he lit a cigarette, standing on the park-side of the street across from Schatenstien’s apartment. He watched the detective move through the motions of his life in the singular kitchen, having only exited the stage a couple times, presumably to use the bathroom or fetch an object from another room. Harvey imagined that this could be the night the detective’s life ends, much the same as his brother’s had ended only a day before. It would be easy, after all. Schatenstien lived alone and probably didn’t expect any trouble. Maybe Harvey could just shoot him through the window and take off in the dark of night. How many others had fallen prey to that scenario in this neighborhood? Or maybe he could ring his bell and shoot him when he answered the door. Again, the cover of night would help with his escape.

 Whatever Harvey would do, he needed to do it soon. The street had been quiet most of the night, but the odds of someone driving by and noticing Harvey – someone like a cop – would increase the longer he stood there. As if to remind himself of what he had to do, Harvey pulled the small revolver from his pants pocket and looked at it, returning it to the same pocket after the inspection. He took a deep breath and stepped into the street.

 From nowhere – nothing seconds before could have portended it – the loud clop of hoof-beats caught Harvey by surprise and he tried to jump out of the way of the charging animal. But the riderless horse reared back and screamed its dislike for Harvey, pushing him back into the park. At first Harvey said nothing, figuring a retreat would likely satisfy the beast and it would be on its way. But each series of steps backward were met with even more intimidation, until both were well off the street and into the trees of the park. Harvey yelled out for help when he decided the horse was not going to back off. *Someone had to have seen this happen,* he thought. The horse screamed and now Harvey yelled – surely, even Schatenstien would notice the commotion. Unfazed, however, by anything Harvey or the horse did, Detective Schatenstien sat completely still, not even giving a brief glance out the window, with the drink that had accompanied his meal poised halfway between the table and his lips.

 In between the horse’s screams came loud snorts of anger as it forced Harvey deeper into the park. By that time Harvey yelled at the top of his lungs, “Somebody help me!” But the neighborhood yielded no aid either because it did not see the act or did not want to see the act. “Jesus Christ! What do you want?”

 A good twenty yards from the street, the horse took one hoof and knocked Harvey backwards. He wasn’t seriously injured, but the fall left him off balance. He tried to get up, but as soon as he rose to his feet he felt a hot sting on the back of his head that put him to the dirt again. Whatever it was, the pain swarmed his head. He touched the back of his neck and his hair felt wet. The tips of his fingers looked like they had been dipped in something red.

 A voice broke the human silence in the park – a voice that Harvey recognized. “I’m sorry, Harvey. I gave you every chance.”

 “Why?” Harvey asked, not seeing the source of the voice but showing him his fingers. “Why this?”

 “You chose this. You could have left well enough alone. But you chose this.”

 “They left me no choice.” Harvey struggled to continue speaking as his head pounded on every sound he made. “They killed my brother. They killed Dirk.”

 “No, Harvey. I killed your brother.”
 “What? Who is that?” He squinted and held the back of his head as he tried to see into the darkness. “Why did you kill Dirk?”

 “Because he left me no choice, either.”

 “Then you’ll have to kill me, too.”

 “No, Harvey. You killed yourself.”

 Another blast from behind sent Harvey face down in the ground again, exhaling a muffled grunt on the way down. For a moment he laid there for dead, but a twitching leg and bending elbows showed he was about to rise again. One final shot skidded him across the grass a foot or two, leaving him motionless.

 “I’m sorry, Harvey.”

 “So I don’t get it,” Baxter said. “Harvey got clubbed to death and you say he killed himself.”

 “That’s right.” Ivan took a sip of water from a cup that Schatenstien set in front of him.

 “And you killed Harvey’s brother. Not us.”

 “Surely, you have the report on the slug they found in Dirk’s brain.”

 “Yeah.” Baxter gazed at his partner. “What did it say, Shotzy?”

 Schatenstien picked up a clipboard from the radiator, flipped back a couple pages, and read, “The bullet found in McDonnell’s skull is a .380 metal case slug, likely shot from an old model Berretta.” He dropped the clipboard on the radiator again. “You and I both shoot ten millimeter Glocks.”

 “You had them cornered,” Ivan continued. “They knew they couldn’t get on the bridge without you nailing them before they could get across. So they were getting ready to pull a raptor.”

 “What the hell is a raptor?”

 “One of them draws you out in the open by standing and facing you while the others move in from the side. I only had a few seconds to get to him before the others had you dead-to-right. Once Dirk went down, the others had to either back off or go for broke. They backed off.”

 Schatenstien got down on his hands and knees next to Ivan. “Why were you there, Ivan? If you knew this was going down you should have called us.”

 “I couldn’t pass on the task. I had to watch your back – just like I’ve always done.”

 “What do you mean by that?” Baxter asked.

 “I mean,” Ivan leaned forward, “I had to watch your back. It’s my job.”

 “This is your revelation?”

 “No. This is my purpose, just like it has been for a long time.”

 Schatenstien stared at Ivan for a few seconds. At one instant, as if he realized something surprising – some piece of evidence that made the whole puzzle make sense – his eyebrows slid upward and his mouth dropped. As he stood up and moved toward the door, he mumbled, “I’ll be right back.”

 In the hall the detective stopped a young uniformed officer and told her, “Bring me the file on the Van Cortlandt Park shooting from July of last year. It’s probably filed under ‘Alejandro Rodriguez et al” in our open files.”

 “You and Doug?”

 “Yeah.”

 “Where do you want it?”

 “I’ll be in the showroom.”

 The officer nodded and took off, while Schatenstien stepped into the observation room on the other side of the mirror looking in on Baxter and Ivan. No one had been observing the activity in the interrogation room since Ivan wasn’t suspected of doing anything major, only being involved as a minor player. But Schatenstien now questioned that role and suspected that something more was a part of Ivan’s “purpose”, as he put it.

 The detective watched as Baxter asked questions of the suspect. Ivan’s manner continued to be more matter-of-fact and open, not nervous and enigmatic as most guilty people would be. Any frustration from the scene came from Detective Baxter who didn’t understand why Ivan did what he did.

 “Here you go,” the young officer said as she opened the door and handed the file to Baxter. “Captain Morris wants to know if you’re going to make an arrest.”

 “Tell him I’m not sure yet,” Schatenstien said as he scanned the paperwork in the file. “But I should know soon.”

 “What are you looking for?”

 The detective didn’t answer right away, but as soon as he found a particular sheet he said, “This right here. Listen. ‘Slugs found in subjects Martinez and Castillo are identified as being ten millimeter rounds with markings consistent to ballistic data on the weapons used by Detective Baxter and Detective Schatenstien. The only slug found in Rodriguez is identified as a .380, as yet with no match in current files on ballistics.’” Schatenstien stared at the report and at the other officer.

 “What?” she asked.

 “You helped bring in Harvey McDonnell, didn’t you?”

 “Yeah. What a mess!”

 “The M.E. just says it was a blunt object that killed him. But you said something that stuck in my head, but I didn’t think anything of it at the time. Do you remember what you said?”

 “Yeah. There were little holes around the wounds, like studs or spikes made them. I said it looked like he was hit with a mace.”

 “That’s it! When you said it I thought you said ‘hit with mace,’ like the spray. But you meant something different.”

 “I said, ‘hit with *a* mace’ – you know, one of those old spiked balls on a chain – like the old time knights used in battle.”

 “Thank you.” Schatenstien laid the paperwork back in the folder and handed it back to the officer, who left the room with the file. For a moment he stared through the one way glass, trying to decide if Ivan was insane or if it was he who was the crazy one.

 After he took a deep breath and exhaled, Shatenstien walked from the observation room into where Baxter and Ivan still talked. As he entered he heard Baxter say, “You keep this up and they’re going to reserve a room for you at Bellevue.”

 “I’m telling you the truth, Detective.”

 “Doug,” Shatenstien interrupted, “go out and get us something to eat. Huh?”

 “What? Now?”

 “Yeah, now. I’m hungry, and I’m sure Ivan’s hungry, too.”

 “Fine.” Baxter crossed his arms and leaned away from the table. “I’ll send a uniform to go get it.”

 “No, Doug. You need to get some air. Run down to the deli and get me a corned beef on rye. Ivan, what do you want?”

 Ivan almost sounded excited. “I’ll take salami and Swiss on a roll, and maybe a little cole slaw.”

 Baxter did not sound happy. “But, Jesus, Ben – ”

 Schatenstien put his hand on his partner’s shoulder. “I’ll explain later. Just go get the stuff.”

 Detective Baxter shook his head and muttered to himself as he walked out of the interrogation room.

 “He looks pissed,” Ivan said.

 “He’ll get over it. He’s alive, isn’t he?”

 “He is that.” Ivan had been watching Baxter, but slowly moved his head and eyes to meet Detective Shatenstien’s. “I think I’m having a revelation,” he said, now smiling. “Why did you get rid of him like that?”

 “Who are you?” The detective returned a half smile. “Or should I say what are you?”

 “Careful, Detective. Your partner is likely to put you away like he would me.”

 “Van Cortlandt Park – Triborough Bridge – how many other times have you watched our back.”

 “You? Just those times.”

 “Anybody else?”

 “Don’t I have a constitutional right not to implicate myself in a crime?”

 “And Harvey? He wasn’t shot like the others. This was something different – something personal maybe.”

 Ivan looked down at his shirt and played with a button about halfway down the front. “I have friends like Harvey and the others because it keeps me closer to the action. Most of them really aren’t a bad sort. They’ve just had hard lives, you know. I had never met Dirk, but that was closer than I would have liked. But Harvey...” Ivan looked up into Schatenstien’s eyes. “I blame myself because I didn’t see it coming. But I really had no choice.”

 “And the mace? That is what was used, right?”

 “I’m just wondering about when you asked *what* I am, are you really aware of the possible answer?”

 “You don’t just do it because you’ve got nothing else to do on a Saturday evening. I’d like to at least know why.”

“Do you remember the role of squires during the age of the feudal system?”

“Sort of. That was a few hundred years ago.”

“Fifteen hundred to be exact.”

“Well, weren’t the squires the up-and-coming knights?”

“In a way. Many of them were destined to become knights. But still many others lived to serve their masters. They carried the shield, they walked the extra horse during battle, and most of all they watched their masters’ backs – protected them while they slept.”

“But like you said,” Detective Schatenstien said and scooted closer to the table, “that was a long time ago. Times are a lot different.”

 “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe times are more complicated. But the job still requires equal amounts of agility and finesse. In the old days I could hear a twig snap at a thousand cubits. Now the noise in the street makes those sorts of observations difficult.”

 “Ivan, you know if I go to the DA with this story, forget about what they’ll do to you. It’ll be me that gets sent to the looney bin.”

 “That’s okay. I’ve done my share of long stretches. You don’t have to tell anyone else. You have my confession so you’re off the hook.”

 Schatenstien touched the tips of his fingers together and stared at them without saying another word.

 “What is it?” Ivan asked.

 “I worry about going back out on the street – and you’re no longer watching my back.”

 As he shook his head to and fro and made the *tsk tsk* sound, Ivan smiled the same way he had through most of the interrogation. “Benjamin, Benjamin. Do you really think I’m alone?”

*The figure standing in the shadows had only a shape. No visible features adorned his face, and I couldn’t make out fingers or even hands… It almost reminded me of staring at a modern painting in an art gallery or museum… or maybe one of those misshaped characters on a canvas being introduced by Rod Serling… leading the viewer to a tale of horror.*

 *A voice beckoned, first undiscernible.*

 *“What?” I queried.*

 *“Beware the ignorance of those you thought you could trust.”*

 *“What does that mean?” What did that mean?*

 *“You’ll know. Beware…”*

 *A flash of light followed instantly by a loud crack of thunder made me jump and my deadened nerves awaken. The weather outside must have taken a turn… but what was stranger was the flash of light… wiping the image of the dark figure from my sight.*

**The Storm**

by Eric M. Christians I

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 The Phillips radio we had in the house as long as I could remember, probably before I was even born, still sounded pretty good as it blared out programs like Jack Benny, The Shadow and of course the news and weather. "Most of the Kankakee area remains under threat of heavy thunderstorms the rest of today and into tonight. Storms have moved slowly to the east across Northern Missouri and Iowa. Both Kirksville, Missouri, and Davenport, Iowa, reported funnel cloud sightings, but there is no reported damage or any injuries. However, in the event of heavy thunderstorms residents are urged to seek shelter in basements, storm cellars, or away from outside walls and windows."

 "Bullshit!" my dad muttered as he walked past the radio, clicked it off, and gazed out the window. "Not a goddamn cloud in the sky."

 Almost as if she had been waiting just outside the living room door for Dad to swear, Mom popped into the room and pointed her finger at him. "Jack, that is not the kind of talk I want Delbert to hear."

 I never understood exactly which words bothered Mom. While Dad fought in the war, my uncle Brewster took me to Cub games where I heard worse language than anything Dad ever said. A few times Uncle Brewster even took me into the dugout, which is where I heard the "f" word the first time.

 "Sorry, Maggie. Those morons on the radio couldn't predict Christmas on December 24th." He stared at the sky as a trickle of sweat ran down the side of his face. "Rain doesn't come from skies like that."

 I hoped Dad would turn the radio back on, but there was no way I would ask him to, nor would I dare turn it on again myself. Dad had never struck me, slapped me or even spanked me. But if anyone acted as if they were going to turn the radio or phonograph on after he'd turned it off, he would glare at them and clear his throat.

 So I managed to pull myself off the couch and walk past Mom into the kitchen. She didn't say anything to me until my hand reached the back door. "Where are you going, Delbert?"

 "I thought I'd go out to the barn and knock out a few sparrows’ nests."

 "You haven't had any breakfast, have you?"

 "I had some cereal when I got up this morning."

 "Well, make sure you get back in here before twelve. Your dad has to go to town later today, and I want us all to eat together."

 "Okay, Mom."

 That sound the screen door made when it slammed loud once and a little softer right after always made me feel great. It never made that same sound in winter, and it always sounded different on school days. On those days I had nowhere to go and nothing to do I loved that double slam. It signaled an unlosable race in the backyard, a carefree romp in the field – or maybe it would even signal a war.

 A deep creek bed snaked its way between our house and the barn. It looked like it had been carved out for a river but now only served a trickle of water. Usually about once a day I took a flying leap across the water, embedded my shoes into the mud, and crawled up the bank on the other side, pretending I was either landing on the beach at Normandy or charging the Island of Iwo Jima.

 The long grass usually felt cool on my legs as I sprinted across the field breathing in that whiff of green, but this time my legs itched and a stale-pond smell rose from the field or out of the air (I couldn't tell which). It was only a little after nine, but the heat stuck to my skin like oven air at Sunday noon.

 The closer I came to the barn the hotter it got, most likely because tall cornstalks in the field behind the barn shut off the airflow. There hadn't been hay in the barn since Dad went into the Army, but its scent intermingling with manure from cows absent for the same interval hit me every time I opened the barn door.

 With the energetic force of the eleven-year-old boy I was, I broke through the barn door yelling, "United States Infantry!" and sputtered machinegun fire through my lips, knowing full well my imitation fell short of the real thing. But the sound in my head was just like being there.

 Maybe it sounded a little too real for someone else. Scaring a trickle of piss out of me, the image of a man over six-foot-tall jumped up from the back of the barn and stared at me intently while he grabbed at the air around him looking for, I guess, some sort of weapon. He crouched in a position like a cornered bobcat ready to swipe its claws at an attacker. I froze with something like fear. I suppose it turned into fear as soon as my brain had enough time to figure out what was going on in that freeze frame of time. But for a moment I stood stunned and a little curious.

 The man's face was unshaven, whiskers long enough you could see streaks of gray in what soon would classify as a beard. A ratty fedora covered his head, worn so much the creases were turning into holes. His grease-stained trench coat seemed strange overdressing for the hottest day of the year. But another point of wardrobe contradicted the stereotypical tramp I assumed I was spying – he wore a tie.

 "You scared the hell out of me, kid!" the guy growled with a slight hint of a smile.

 "You? I think I pissed my pants." I may have sounded pretty brave, but I thought about running and telling Mom. "What are you doing here?"

 "I was tired. Been hopping freights from St. Louis. Needed a break."

 "There ain't no train tracks around here. The closest one is over by the highway, and that's a long way from here."

 The intruder relaxed his stance and even turned his back on me. "I know. A couple railroad employees threw me off the train. A railroad dick and the sheriff chased me out of town."

 "We're not the first farm between here and town."

 "You're the first with an abandoned barn. Your old man doesn't farm, ay?"

 "Not anymore. He had to go to war and Mom and my uncle sold all the farmland to our neighbor, Mr. Meyer. The barn is still ours."

 "So your dad got killed in the war."

 That sentence scared me. "No! He came back home two years ago, as soon as the war ended. Why'd you think he got killed?"

 The stranger turned toward me and breathed a heavy sigh. "I don't know. I figured if your dad came back he'd have started farming again."

 "Not no more. He's a lectrician now."

 "Really? The Army teach him?"

 "I guess. Uncle Brewster says the Army owed him something. Says they took him away for five years and now they owed us something."

 "Yeah, well..." My new friend found his seat again where he had been when I came crashing through the door. "They may owe it to you, but you don't always get it. I was in the Navy when Pearl Harbor was attacked. Since then I was everywhere - Africa, France, then all over the South Pacific - now I'm here in your barn. What about your dad? Where was he stationed?"

 I had begun moving closer. "I think he was in Japan."

 "Japan? Nobody was stationed in Japan."

 "I don't think he was stationed there. But Uncle Brewster said he was fighting the Japanese. Is there a place called Gram?"

 "Guam, maybe?"

 "Yeah, I think. I guess he fixed radios there and some other places around it."

 "Your dad doesn't like talking about the war, does he?"

 I only gave him a shrug because I didn't understand how he knew that.

 "That's okay. I guess I don't like thinking about it much myself. Too many bad memories." Finally, as though embarrassed for not having done it sooner, the man reached his hand out and said, "My name's Boomer. What's yours?"

 "Delbert." I took his hand after I stared at it for a second, then squeezed vigorously. "Delbert Jockisch."

 "That's quite a handshake you got there. Hey, you wouldn't happen to have any food on you."

 "No," as I patted my pockets. "But I could go ask my mom for some bread."

 "No. Better not do that. Don't suppose your mom would like the idea of me being in your barn all night."

 "I could bring you back something after dinner. Dad has to go to town after dinner and when he does Mom'll go to the car with him. I can sneak some bread out then, and maybe some pork chops."

 "Don't get my hopes up, kid. Just a couple pieces of bread'll be fine if that's all you can get."

 Boomer acted like he could already taste the food. But still, dinner was a few hours away. There had to be a better way. "Are you sure you don't want to come up to the house. Mom might feed you right now."

 "If there's one thing I've learned in my travels, it's that people of my own generation trust me a lot less than people in your generation. I think right now, if you don't mind," he slid his hat over his eyes, "I'll get some shut eye. I was up pretty late last night."

 I had the same disappointment I got when Dad shut off the radio. "But couldn't you tell me something about when you were in the war?"

 "What's to tell, kid?" Boomer shuffled around, making the same noises people make in a comfortable chair. "It was a war. Your old man probably has better stories to tell than I do."

 Didn't I wish. "Yeah, but – but he don't talk about it much - or even any at all, like you said. Uncle Brewster says he's shell shot."

 "I think your uncle means *shell shocked*. And it happened to the best of 'em."

 "What does that mean?"

 "Tell you what, kid. Let me get some sleep, bring back that bread later, and I'll tell you about the war. Deal?"

 That helped. "Sure! I mean, deal."

 Something else startled me as I walked out of the barn, although not as much as when I had met Mr. Boomer inside. The bright sunshine, making me squint just moments before, went dark like it had been blotted out or turned off like a light bulb. When I looked up I saw a big gray cloud with white puffy edges sailing across the sky between the sun and the exact spot where I stood. I watched its shadow move toward our house and across the road like a big truck going down the highway. In the other direction, distant bright sunlight chased the backside of the shadow, neither gaining nor falling behind. Funny - the cloud didn't look like it was moving that fast in the sky, but on the ground it had to be going about forty miles an hour.

 I guess that was the first time I really heard what the man on the radio had said earlier. Oh, I heard the guy, but I really didn't. I don't think Dad did either.

 But that was the only cloud I could see in the sky.

 The dinner table was set no different than any other time, but I noticed every scrap of food and wondered just how much I could get out of the house without Mom or Dad catching me. Mom had cut an unusually large amount of bread that day, and I was almost right when I told Boomer we'd probably have pork chops. Mom made a pork roast, something different for a Thursday dinner.

 When Dad came to the table I noticed something different in his wardrobe. Not only was he wearing a pressed white shirt, but today he wore a tie. I saw Dad in a tie only twice a year, Easter and Christmas – when we went to church. "Where are you going today, Dad?"

 Barely acknowledging I asked a question, Dad filled his plate while Mom put her hand on his shoulder and replied, "Your Dad has a job interview in town."

 Still addressing him directly, I said, "But you already have a job."

 This time Dad answered. "I may have a chance for a better-paying job."

 "He's going to work for an architect," Mom continued. "Your Dad studied engineering in college – before you were born. He hopes he'll be able to use what he learned at this new job."

 "If I get it."

 "If he gets it."

 I jabbed a piece of meat with my fork and popped it in my mouth. "You'll be an engineer?"

 I didn't know I had asked such a serious question, but Dad's face drew up almost to the mad position, teeth and jaw clenched with eyebrows low over his eyes, and eased back to normal. "No," Dad continued chewing his food, too, "but I'll be working with the engineering office of this firm."

 I twisted my fork so a glimmer of sunlight reflected off it and danced across Dad's face, making him wince a bit. At the same time a gust of wind must have caught the underneath side of the roofing on the house and rumbled enough to cause Dad to look up at the ceiling. A funny glaze coated his eyes, and for a moment he stopped chewing. Maybe he was just nervous or maybe worried about the weather, but I had seen that look before; it usually scared me. For some reason this time I felt the same way when I see the goofy kid who sits behind me in school get punched in the stomach by the bully who used to pick on me. It doesn’t hurt me, but I feel his pain.

 While Mom stood in the drive watching Dad go down the road, I easily managed to get some roast, a baked potato, and some bread into a pie pan and head toward the barn.

 Most of the sky remained clear blue except for a line of painted gray and white clouds following the horizon to the Northwest. Three or four more of those big floating clouds like the one that snuck up on me in the morning found their way into sky. It wasn't like I hadn't seen clouds before, but the radio weatherman talked about some heavy storms and tornadoes. I can't remember when I finally figured out the truth, but when I was little I thought a tornado was some sort of animal like a giant rat or a coyote. Grown-ups used to talk about tornadoes going through and tearing up anything in their path. Uncle Brewster even told me about one with a wicked tail. What else was I supposed to think?

 "Your mom's a good cook, kid," Boomer said as he tore into a piece of roast. "I haven't eaten this good in months." He stopped chewing. "Scratch that. Years."

 "Don't you got a home?"

 "I did, once. I use to have a place in Chicago with my wife."

 "Why don't you go back?"

 "Nothin' is that easy, kid. You know, I thought the hardest part about going into the service was gonna be the war.” Boomer shook his head. “Nope. Getting out, that's the trick."

 I shook my head along with him.

 "Don't worry. Someday you'll understand. Then again, maybe you won't. After the last war maybe it'll be a while before we have another. Huh?" His hand ran across my head and ruffled my hair. "Maybe you'll be an old man before that happens."

 "Uncle Brewster says now we have to watch out for the Russians."

 "So, what's the deal with Uncle Brewster? Was he ever in the service?"

 "No. He says they wouldn't let him in because if they had he would've kicked the shit out of every Nazi and Nip in the war."

 Boomer huffed and slightly shook his head as he kept eating. "Pretty big talk. Maybe he should've backed that up with a little action."

 "Oh, he's not kidding. If he kicked you it would hurt 'cause his leg is made of wood."

 "Jesus!" I thought Boomer was going to drop his plate. "I'm sorry, kid. I didn't know he only had one leg."

 "He's got two. One’s just made of wood, like I said. I guess he had two regular ones once. There was some sort of hunting accident when him and my dad were kids."

 Boomer's voice dropped a bit. "Jesus!" When he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a metal flask I realized I hadn't brought him anything to drink. Guess I worried too late and for no reason. Boomer had his own.

 "You said you'd tell me something about the war."

 "Yeah, but you'd probably think my stories are too boring. After all, I didn't see a lot of action. I mostly sailed in convoys."

 "What's a convoy?"

 "Well, that's a whole fleet of ships sailing together to take men, supplies, or weapons all over the world. We only had one really big fight."

 Great! My own radio program. I laid down on the barn floor and propped myself up on my elbows. "What happened in that one?"

 By this time Boomer was sopping up what was left of the gravy with his bread in one hand and taking tugs on his flask with the other, his plate carefully balanced on his knees. "Well, see there was this heavy fog, and our ship was supposed to meet up with this destroyer somewhere close to the Philippines. Me and this other sailor were walking on deck. Well, actually the other guy had been puking over the side and I was helping him out. I mean, it wasn't rough right then, but George hated not being on land. Anyway, we were looking over the side and George sees something sticking out of the water. When I looked I realized it was the periscope of a submarine. Well, right about that time I guess one of the other crewmen had seen it because we dropped a depth charge. When the charge went off George lost his footing and fell over the side. I started yelling, 'Man overboard!' but no one heard me because sailors were shooting machine guns and more depth charges were going off."

 "What did you do then?"

 "I ran to the nearest life preserver, grabbed it and jumped into the water. I was about halfway between the deck of the ship and the water when it occurred to me I was about to be swimming in the same water with an enemy sub, depth charges, and five hundred men aboard my ship shooting at anything in the water that moved. When I got to George he was thrashing around in the water in a panic, screaming, 'We're gonna die! I won't make it this time! We're gonna die!' So I handed him the life preserver and yelled, 'Grab it, George. We're not gonna fuckin' die!' I told him that, but I didn't believe it myself. By the time he calmed down the ship was a good half a mile away from us - the sub, too.

 "The water was still alive with shock-waves from the depth charges and gunfire. And if that wasn't bad enough, George was driving me crazy ranting and raving about drowning. I mean, I was getting mad at him because I knew we were okay for the moment. But George was beyond thinking reasonably. I could see it in his eyes, white completely surrounding his pupils; all color missing from his face; and hear it in his voice, cracking like a sax with a bad reed. I had served with George for months and I never saw him act the way he was acting at that very moment."

 "Maybe he just thought the ship wouldn't come back."

 "Well, that's what I thought, too. But I got to thinking about what he was saying about 'not making it this time.' And then I remembered something he had told me about that happened when he was a kid. George and his cousin were fishing on Lake Michigan and the water got rough and capsized their boat. His cousin drowned and he nearly did, except a nearby fishing boat showed up and pulled him out of the water. It wasn't the war that was scaring him. George was reliving that day in the water with his cousin. And like all guys, sooner or later – he thought his number was up."

 "What happened?"

 "After about an hour the ship destroyed the sub and sent a patrol boat to come get us. Once we got George in the boat he was better, but still shaking like a leaf. He never recovered enough to be a good sailor again – and finally he got sent home."

 Maybe I was too young to understand, but that didn't seem like much of a story. Boomer hadn't really done much fighting. Oh, sure, he did help save George's life, but the real story had to have been on the ship. "Was that the only battle you were in?"

 "No. There was another time on another ship where we ended up in the water again." Boomer came to his feet and looked into my eyes as he smiled. "But I can tell you're not exactly impressed with those kinds of stories."

 Oops! I had hoped that wouldn't be obvious. "That was a neat story. It's just that..."

 Boomer patted me on the shoulder. "I know, I know. No blood and guts."

 A distant rumbling caught our attention and temporarily distracted us from the subject of old war stories. At first I thought a truck had gone over a bump in the road, but it rumbled again and echoed all the way across the sky.

 Boomer and I walked to the door and pushed it open. The gray and white puffy clouds covered the sky, and further West they built a wall of dark gray graduating to dark blue closer to the horizon. While we watched, a slight flash of light changed the color for an instant. It took almost a minute before a third rumbling hit our ears.

 "Maybe you better get back up to your house, kid." Boomer's hand never left my shoulder while we watched the sky those few short minutes. "I could tell something was on the way this morning."

 "The guy on the radio said it wasn't supposed to hit until later tonight."

 "You've got some time. The edge of it's probably about a half-hour away."

 I wasn't worried about me. I wasn't even worried about Mom and Dad. I looked up at Boomer who seemed to be smiling at the weather. "What about you, Mr. Boomer?"

 His hand, still resting on my shoulder, squeezed just a bit and shook. "Don't worry about me. I'll be heading out to catch a freight to Chicago."

 "But the track is a long ways from here. You'll never make it."

 "Trust me, kid. I'll be on my way to the city long before this storm hits hard."

 "But you could come up to our house. We have a storm cellar and..."

 Boomer dropped to one knee and came eye to eye with me. "Look. I'll be okay. You're a good kid and your heart's in the right place. But you've got your family to think about. And I don't think your folks would be too comfortable having me in the storm cellar with you."

 The sound of my mom's voice always carried a long way, especially when it uttered the one word with which I was most familiar. "Del-bert!"

 I guess Mom heard the thunder, too. "I better go. You're sure you don't want to come?"

 "Go on, kid. Maybe I'll see you again sometime."

 I nodded and hung my head as I walked to the house. I looked back a couple times and waved at Boomer. But when I looked back one more time to give him one last hearty wave, he was gone. I suppose he could have gone back in the barn - but I don't think so. I tried to catch a glimpse of him running across the grass or through the corn, but that didn't seem like something he'd do. I wanted to believe he was in the barn.

 About quarter-to-five Dad's car flew into the drive and threw rocks all over the yard as it stopped. It seemed strange, but it made my stomach queasy when Mom ran out of the house full speed, something I had never seen her do. That time the double slam of the back door struck a sharp tone that didn't make me feel good. The pause between the two slams stretched a bit longer than usual as a steady rush of air held it, then slammed it harder the second time.

 I couldn't make out what Mom said, but I heard Dad say, "Yeah, I know. I heard on the radio. They spotted one at Dwight and there's hail falling southwest of here. Has it rained here yet?"

 Again, I couldn't hear Mom, but it hadn't rained. The clouds had filled the sky and lightning and thunder made Mom and me jumpy. But it was just warming up. I never really felt a real storm before. Oh, I remember storms, thunder, lightning, the whole bit. But I had never sat through one thinking about what was really happening, how the lightning could kill you, the wind could blow your house down, and the rain could send you floating down the river.

 But what did they spot in Dwight?

 Dad walked right past me on his way to the radio. He twisted the “On” knob hard and fast and landed on the couch quick. Instead of news being broadcasted, like I'm sure Dad wanted, it played a song; it might have been Bing Crosby, it might have been someone else. Dad responded, "Shit. Give me the goddamn weather!"

 The song dragged on through one, two, three loud claps of thunder that made me breathe a little heavier and turned Dad's knuckles white. Each one had been louder than the one before, and the time between the flash and the crash narrowed as well. If that weren't enough, the constant crackle of static told us lightning was dropping from the sky all over the place, further than what we could see.

 "Jack, we can see there's a storm coming," Mom said, walking past the kitchen doorway. "Do you really need to hear it on the radio?"

 "Goddamn it, Margaret! I just want to know if there's a tornado in what's headed our way!"

 "There's a lot of ground to cover in this part of the state. The chances of one hitting us have to be pretty slim."

 Dad ignored her.

 "And now," the announcer jumped in, "here's an update on the storm crossing the Northern Illinois region. Heavy rains accompanied by strong winds, hail, and lightning have taken their toll on towns as far south as Bloomington and as far north as Rockford. We do have several confirmed sightings of tornadoes in Washington, Gridley, Pontiac, and Dwight. So far, however, none have apparently touched down or done significant damage. People are advised to seek shelter if you are in the path of this storm in basements or storm cellars immediately until the storms pass." He stopped. And then, "I've just been handed this bulletin--" a loud crackle made it stop again – only this time he never came back on the air.

 Dad hit the radio, "Goddamn it! What about the goddamn bulletin?"

 A different noise shook us all up. The sound of rustling tin in the distance scared Mom and Dad, but only brought one word to my lips. "Boomer."

 Mom and Dad in unison asked, "What?"

 I didn't even know I said it out loud. Now what do I say?

 I needn't have worried about that slip because a couple seconds later neither of my petrified parents could even remember I’d spoken.

 "Maybe we should get to the storm cellar," Mom said, sounding reasonable but with enough of a tremor to let us know she was still scared.

 Dad wouldn't answer. As soon as the radio had gone off he began pacing from window to window. He hadn't announced to Mom or me we were staying inside the house to weather this storm, but he ritualized his pacing so much it would take an act of God to break that chain of duty.

 The pitch in Mom's voice remained unchanged when she urged once more, "Jack, it wouldn't hurt if we went into the storm cellar." Mom walked into the living room and took my hand, and walked away with me in tow.

 "Margaret," Dad said, quieter than before, "where are you going with Del?"

 "I think we should go to the cellar before it starts pouring rain and we get drenched just walking out there."

 "I'm sorry, Margaret." What was he sorry for? Being scared? I know I was scared – but not of the storm. I was scared Mom, or Dad, or both would lose it before the storm could reach us.

 The kitchen window shattered into slivers at the hands of a rusty piece of tin. Mom and I beat Dad to the kitchen to see it, but he pushed us aside to assess the damage. "Oh, my God!" Dad put his hands on Mom's upper arms to keep her back. "That ain't good."

 "What is it?" Mom's fear intermingled with curiosity.

 "That tin’s from the barn across the pasture."

 "Jack," Mom remained calm, "now is the time for us to get in the cellar. I'll get some candles and the old lantern."

Whatever made Mom decide to talk to Dad as calm as she did, it worked. "No, I'll get the candles," Dad replied. "You take Del."

But I wasn't ready to hand out any bravery awards yet. Mom must have started out the back door three times in as many minutes with me at her side. And Dad gathered candles, but only the ones we kept in the two nearest rooms.

 Was I crazy? Those two acted as if the most brutal killer on the ten-most-wanted list was coming, and all I could think about was whether or not Mr. Boomer made it to the train, another barn, or something. I don't think I was being brave. I didn't feel brave. But I could have cared less about the storm. Once Mom and I finally made it outside the back door we stood within ten feet of the shelter, and real safety – but I didn't feel safer. I harbored more fear about my parents coming unglued than of any storm. I didn't care about the storm. I wanted Mom and Dad to be all right.

 Mom and I waited on the grass as Dad emerged from the back door. As I looked toward and then past him I got my first real look at the thing I had thought to be a giant rat or a coyote. Two tones of black and blacker made up its head, which reared up in the violent sky. Its body narrowed as it went down, and sections twisted as if it had several sets of pelvic bones. The tail dragged the ground with a puff of dark brown following its path. I don't know how far away it was, a whole county away or just across the pasture. It didn't matter. It didn’t move left, it didn’t move right. It just kept getting bigger. Whether it roared two counties away or right next door, it didn't matter. It was going to hit us.

 Mom saw it as soon as I did and hollered at Dad, "Jack, my God!"

 When Dad turned around I thought for an instant he got smaller. His knees bent and he crouched low and started to take the first step down the back stairs when his legs gave out and he fell all the way to the ground. Mom and I ran to pick him up, thinking he might be hurt. "Jesus God!" he said over and over, his eyes tracking the funnel cloud. Dad seemed as though the fall hadn't hurt him, but Mom and I had trouble getting him to move toward the storm cellar. His face stayed pointed to the storm. "Jesus God! Jesus God, almighty!"

 Once the house came between us and our view of the twister, Dad snapped out of it and was able to walk on his own. Between the three of us, we managed to get the cellar door open, Mom shoving me down the steps and Dad sort of dropping in with the doors. Dad picked up an old piece of wood covered in dirt and cobwebs and slid it through the metal handles on the doors.

 *I sure hope Boomer is safe*, I thought. What if he was down in the barn? Maybe there was time to yell at him to come up to the cellar. But he had to be gone. He knew the storm was coming. Why would he stick around if he knew the storm was coming?

 The illusion of safety in the cellar was enough for Mom. After she lit about a half-dozen candles she relaxed in a lawn chair toward the back of the cellar. Her breathing slowed to deep sighs, getting shallower on every breath.

 Dad was another matter. He faced the cellar door about six feet back and stared at it, awaiting something. Hands white, hair drenched from sweat and rain, knees locked, and eyes focused on nothing more than a nail hole on the door, Dad's whole presence was an effigy of fear.

 Then came the roar. God, if I hadn't known the train tracks were a good five miles from here I would have sworn a train rocketed past our place. The noise even had Mom looking around, at what I don't know. There wasn't a window in the cellar. And the louder the roar got, the more Dad's shoulders started to shrink and creep up his neck.

 First the roar, then five cracks of thunder blasted our perimeter, no more than two-tenths of a second between them. WAM! WAM! WAM! WAM! BOOM! The last one trailed off as if it carried the other four and broke off, probably preparing for another run. Less than a minute later more thunder blanketed the area. WAM! WAM! WAM! This time they hit a target. The sound of a great bundle of wood twisting in a strain, followed by a loud crash told us one of the trees in the yard must have become a casualty. At the same time Dad fell back onto the floor.

 Mom rushed to his side. "Jack, are you okay?"

 Dad shook his head and tears formed in the corners of his eyes.

 "Jack, what's wrong?" Her voice never changed.

 The sound of his breathing took on a portion of his voice. He couldn't talk, but pieces of words spilled out in garbled patterns.

 "Jack, talk to me!"

 "We, we, I can't - we're not –"

 "We're not what?"

 "We're not – going to make it."

 Mom's eyebrows always dropped in the middle to make a V when she became confused. "Why are you saying that? We're fine. We're safe down here."

 "No." His head wouldn't stop shaking. "They're going to get through. It's too much. They're going to get through."

 "Jack, nothing is going to get through. We just lost a tree in the yard. That's all."

 "No, you don't understand." Dad was almost crying. "My number is up. You see. It's my time. It has to be."

 Mom's eyebrows made an even sharper V than before. "No, I don't see. I don't see at all. We're safe in here. The storm is not going to reach us here. I don't care if it blows our whole darn house off the foundation, the storm is not going to hurt us."

 Now it was Dad's turn to look confused. "Storm?"

 As real as if Mom or Dad had said it, I heard a voice coming from somewhere next to me, and it sounded like Boomer. "Help him."

 "Boomer?" I said it out loud – again.

 Mom jerked her head toward me and glared. "Why do you keep saying that?"

 But Dad continued with his surrender. "All the times - all the times we came so close. I was always spared. But not this time. There's no one else to take. It has to be me."

 Again that eerie hush of a voice came out of thin air next to me, but from no discernable side, "Help him."

 I took slow steps toward Dad's direction until I was close enough to touch him. His skin was cold and clammy and barely reacted when my hand circled his arm. "It's okay, Dad."

 "What?" I couldn't tell if he was in the same world as us.

 "It's okay. Mom's right. We're going to be okay."

 "Of course, we are." Mom sounded condescending, as though she was talking to two kids. I really wanted her to shut up.

 "You don't have to worry about it, Dad. We're safe in here – because we're not in the war. The war's been over for two years."

 Mom's head jerked back, and her chin tucked into her chest. "What the hell are you talking about?"

 I ignored her. "Dad, did you hear me. The war is over. You're home - with Mom and me – Delbert."

 A crack of thunder made Dad jump. Christ! It even made me jump that time. "But the bombs?" Dad pleaded.

 "They're not bombs. It's just lightning."

 "Lightning?" Dad said as he stared at the door again.

 "Yeah, lightning. It's just a storm."

 The muscles in his entire body tensed even tighter for a minute or two – but then relaxed, and he fell back onto his elbows while he let loose with a deep sigh. "Oh, my God! It's just a storm?"

 The light was beginning to shine with Mom. She nodded and looked at me while she answered, "Yes, Jack. That's all it is."

 Dad looked at Mom, looked at me, and took one more look at the door. As he smiled he said, "It's just a storm." The arm I had been holding pulled away from my hand and slipped over my head to rest on my shoulders. With his other hand Dad grabbed the side of Mom's face and pulled us together in some sort of disorganized hug. It was nice, but it needed work.

 Hours must have passed when the storm finally moved on. None of the candles had more than about a quarter-inch left to burn. I had actually fallen asleep. I think Dad and Mom did, too.

 When I awoke I found myself nestled in the crook of Dad's arm, a position not familiar – but comfortable. As soon as I stirred and pulled myself up, Dad shuffled a bit and opened his eyes. He smiled at me as he struggled to get his bearings.

 Once I was standing I stretched and yawned, and I walked over to the cellar doors. I had only a passing thought about Boomer and where he might have been – where he might have gone. Now I thought only about what lay outside of those cellar doors.

 Dad pulled the piece of lumber out of the door handles and both of us pushed the doors open. Not unlike Dorothy emerging from her flying house after it had landed, Dad and I ventured out of the cellar, both unaware of what we would find.

 It was still dark out, but the stars in the sky made us understand why. A full moon peaked through a line of clouds that now moved away from us. The sound of running water came from all sides, pushing its way from the fields, to the ditches, to the big creek in our backyard, and ultimately to a river somewhere, I'm sure.

 Our house was still standing. But the tree next to the driveway had been knocked flat, blocking our drive and narrowly missing Dad's parked car. In the moonlight I could see past the creek, across the pasture, to our old barn standing tall as it ever did. Every piece of tin on the roof was intact – except one, the one that found its way into our kitchen.

 Dad stood tall, one hand on his waist and the other at the back of my neck. And as he spoke he patted my back. "I was a sergeant..."

*I’m not sure why they hadn’t just set me in a wheelchair as the took me out of the recover room. But the bed I’d been stretched out on for sixteen hours rolled quite nicely through the halls. At one point on the floor where my new room was a nurse stopped them and said, “He’s an ortho patient. We don’t do ortho patients up here.”*

 *“They’re full up on five. You have to take him. Dr. Whalen’s orders.”*

 *“Fine, but I only have one bed and I’m not sure he’ll like his roommate.”*

 *“When do they ever?”*

 *They rolled me down the hall and into a room where several other nurses waited. As soon as they parked me next to the bed each of them grabbed a section of the sheet I laid on and slid me onto the bed.*

 *“There,” the recovery nurse said as she breathed a sigh of relief. “You are handed off to these fine people.”*

 *While the others hooked up my IV and checked my morphine drip, one nurse asked the recovery nurse, “Where’s his chart?” She slipped the button to the morphine delivery system into my hand having fallen out in the tussle.*

 *“Robin has it at the desk. I needed her to call Dr. Whalen to get any other instructions for him.”*

 *They continued talking for a bit, but I sort of faded out as soon as I pressed the button for the morphine. Wow! It never worked that fast before. I briefly faded in again, long enough to see them all viewing me as if I had passed away. I waited for someone to say how much I looked like myself. Each one in turn bowed his or her head, turned, and walked out of the room. When the last person left, shaking her head and uttering, “Tsk, tsk,” the image of the dark figure I had seen all too often in the past sixteen hours loomed at the end of the curtain separating the two beds in the room.*

 *He spoke. “Shame.”*

**Tillie’s Last Hammock**

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 How is it that two oaks, the only pair of trees in Tillie’s backyard, grew exactly ten feet apart? There’s one maple, one walnut, one cottonwood, and one willow, not including the old elm stump. There’s a grove of pines, all at staggered heights, and three fruit trees – an apple, a cherry, and a peach. But there were two oaks, as if God had denied the spot to the oaks but someone else said, “There have to be two there – there have to be two oaks.” God didn’t plant two oaks in Tillie’s backyard. But there they stood.

 Tillie’s bony hand trembled as she wrapped the rope around the trunk of the oak and tied a perfect square knot. She groaned a little while she paced toward the other oak and bent down to pick up the rope. The canvas of the hammock flapped in the wind while she tied the loose end to the twin. The first knot had been easy. This one, however, needed to be tight. She wasn’t securing a ship to a dock or wild stallion to a hitching post, but the knot had to hold the weight of a hundred and twenty pound woman – maybe a hundred and ten. As she gripped the rope and felt it burn in her hand, she looked down at them, amazed. Were these her hands? Hers had been pink and pudgy, her little fingers belonging to cookies and cakes, her tiny nails once adorned with mauve or shell. Now the skin on her hand clung to the bone, her nails chipped and dirty, and what used to be pink now looked more yellow, maybe even green. The rope may have burned, but it could do no more damage to these hands.

 “It’s too cold.”

 Tillie ignored the words. She laid the blanket across the hammock canvas and dropped a pillow at the east end. She looked at it for a couple seconds or moments, but not minutes. There wasn’t time for minutes. Every minute had to count. Thinking about every step, every move, every twist, Tillie turned her body and eased it into the hammock. The rope slid maybe a half an inch down the east tree, but that was all. There wasn’t enough weight to strain the ropes beyond that – maybe a hundred and ten pounds, maybe less. Once she laid her head on the pillow she pulled the blankets across from each side and tucked them under her chin. “Ahh,” she exhaled, her little body still swinging a bit from the movement into the hammock.

 “Where are all your friends?”

 Tillie closed her eyes and squinted. Her lips moved ever so slightly but only the faint whisper of air could be heard in lieu of anything being said. Her sunken cheeks, once rose petal pink and smooth like a plastic doll’s, looked brown, almost bruised, the lines under her eyes having turned into sinkholes, brown near the eye and yellow on the rim of the skull. For over fifty years her nose had been almost non-descript, a tiny triangle dropped into the center of her face, the envy of her childhood peers. As she lay in the hammock her nose jutted above the rest of her face, blotches of red and scales of skin joined with the dampness of sickness and loneliness. Her lips kissed many a boy in her day – Michael, Rudy, Saul, and Joshua to name a few. Those soft, moist, sweet lips disappeared with the likes of those boys and turned to thin, cracked, scab-filled portals to her long forgotten mouth.

 “You wanted this, Tillie? To die beneath these two oaks?”

 She had never been for want as a girl. Her father treated her like a princess. Her mother told her she should enjoy life and not tie herself to one man. Her father gave her a car and a stereo. Her mother bought her books about self-awareness. Her father gave Michael a hundred dollars when he picked Tillie up for the prom. Her mother took her to the doctor a month before the prom. Her father said, “Marry a good Jew.” Her mother said maybe he should have taken his own advice. Her father left home a month after Tillie’s graduation. Her mother died in Tillie’s house ten years ago to the day.

 Tillie opened her eyes and stared at the empty space in the yard. “Well?” she said. “Aren’t you going to say anything?”

 The wind rushed across the yard and blew the leaves from the west to the east. But there never was a point where west was empty and east was full. They blew and they blew and they blew. There were always enough leaves in the west and never too many in the east. An iron chair, one of its legs buried in a couple inches of dirt, sat next to a defunct fountain. Tillie couldn’t imagine right away why it was there, but finally remembered that she used to watch the goldfish in the fountain pool. The last time must have been months ago – maybe years. She had to have been heavy enough to embed the leg into the ground, perhaps when she weighed a hundred and twenty or thirty. Now, her hundred pound frame would scarcely affect the chair – if she even weighed that.

 “Nothing to say, now?” she said again.

 The screen door on the back porch opened with the wind and slammed again, slapping the door frame twice before closing. A rake that rested against the steps slid forward and fell to the sidewalk. She started to weep for a moment when she thought how her mother would bring a couple glasses of lemonade through that very door, and the two of them would watch the sunset, her mother sitting in the iron chair and Tillie lounging in the hammock. More than once her mother knocked over a rake or a hoe or a broom that sat beside the back steps. And the screen door always double-slammed shut.

 “Why do you provoke yourself? Your memories bring nothing but pain.”

 Tillie shut her eyes. “My memories are all I have.”

 “You relish your past?”

 “It’s all I have.”

 “You find peace in your own singular life?”

 “It’s all I ever wanted.”

 “It’s all you ever got. You wanted more.”

 Tillie pulled her head up and felt the breeze on her face. It was cool and she was glad to be covered, but the breeze felt nice. As nice as it felt, she felt a pain in her chest forcing her to breathe a bit heavier. A swirl of leaves surrounded her for a moment and passed, so close were they that she could smell the scent that’s usually not sensed until they are burned. The leaves stopped swirling but the rustling never ended. “I wanted more.”

 “Of course, you wanted more. You wanted more than a kiss from Michael.”

 “I wanted a life.”

 “You wanted a life with him.”

 “But I got a kiss.”

 “And that’s all you got.”

 “My mother got more than a kiss. And it was all taken away.” Tillie rested her head on the pillow again. “I got a kiss.”

 “But that’s all you got.”

“And you can’t take that away from me.”

“You’re pathetic – happy to lie in your hammock. You watched the world go by from that hammock. Now you’re going to see your last from that hammock.”

“Go away. You never did me any good before. It’s too late now.”

“I did my best. But you wouldn’t listen.”

Tillie’s breathing grew more pronounced, as breathing through her nose could no longer provide enough air. She lay still, the only movement now being caused by her breathing – although her ninety-eight pound frame moved very little.

A mass of gray clouds parted in the west and let a few rays of light pop through as if painted by Michelangelo onto a canvas in the sky. The sun never did reveal itself, but more and more rays wandered into view, one time casting a light on the hill down the road. A silver star atop a monument from the cemetery reflected the light of the sun for an instant, but faded quickly.

“You wanted more.”

Tillie could no longer speak easily, so she shook her head.

“You wanted more – and now it’s over.”

Tillie took a couple deep gulps of air and opened her eyes to stare at the underside of the oak trees between which she rested. They towered high above, swaying in the wind, still holding onto more green leaves than the other trees, save the pines. Their trunks may have stood fast, but the great branches born of those trunks rocked to the pace of the wind. Tillie thought she could hear the sound of wood creaking in those oak branches. “Who says it’s over?” When Tillie stopped breathing her eyes remained affixed to the tops of the oaks, her mouth agape from the last breath. An acorn dislodged from the top of the east oak and fell through the branches – knocking loose leaves, dead twigs and other acorns – and dropped directly into Tillie’s mouth.

 *“I’m Mike,” I thought the dark figure said.*

 *But I shut my eyes and opened them again… and the dark image had been replaced by a weird little bald man with a full beard.*

 *“I’m your roommate.”*

 *I said something, but I still couldn’t get a fix on exactly what was happening.*

 *“I have a cousin with that name.”*

 *Did I tell him my name? Was he really my roommate or some sort of demonic sprite?*

 *“I used to be a meth addict.”*

 *Yeah, and I used to be Dutch.*

 *“Anyway, what are you in for?”*

 *About that time the nurse walked in. “Time to change the dressing on your knee.”*

 *“Knee surgery, ay?” Mike said. “You played sports? I wasn’t really into sports, what with the meth and all.”*

 *The nurse pulled the covers off my left leg and sat beside the bed. “I hate to ask this, but do you know how to change this dressing?”*

 *Was she kidding? Who was the nurse and who was the patient?*

 *“This isn’t the ortho floor. We usually have all the issues like stomach, respiratory, and cardiac.”*

 *“And renal,” Mike said. “Don’t forget renal.”*

 *“Oh yeah. Mike knows almost as much about what we do as we do. He’s our ‘favorite’ patient.” She rolled her eyes when she said favorite where Mike couldn’t see.*

 *“I have a GI bleed that comes back every now and then,” Mike said, almost proud. “Did I tell you? I used to do meth… but I kicked it.”*

 *“Yes, Mike,” the nurse said. “We’re all very proud of you… How long has it been?”*

 *“July 5th.”*

 *Today was July 23rd.*

 *“Now,” the nurse attempted to get the conversation back on track, “about the bandage. Do they just cut it off?”*

 *I could scarcely remember the last time. The last time… There shouldn’t have been another time so there should also not have been a last time. But the infection changed all that. Before I just need a new knee. That sounded complicated enough. Now the presence of a magic elixir known as antibiotics was needed to kill an onslaught of little organisms invading my body… all because someone forgot to wash their hands. And this nurse needed by instructions on how to change my own dressing.*

 *While the nurse carefully cut the gauze and tape wrapped around my leg, Mike stood behind her and uttered, “Ooo. That looks ugly.”*

 *I would have found his remarks totally inappropriate… if it weren’t for the dark figure standing behind him, holding out his right hand… almost as if he was blessing me… or cursing me…*

Ponce De Leon II

Copyright 1982

# CRESTVIEW, FLORIDA

 “Dr. Benjamin J. Kraun, Geriatric Medicine.”

 The big wooden sign outside Doc’s combination house and office came down easily, along with the steel posts that held it. The two workmen taking out the old sign, and posts threw them into the back of their truck.

 “Anything else, Doc?” one of the workmen asked.

 On the porch of the house stood Dr. Benjamin J. Kraun himself. Known as B.J. in grade school, Big Ben in medical school, the town doctor in his early career, and now just old Doc Kraun; his large seventy-five year old frame now needed to be propped up by his arms on the porch rail. His white moustache virtually covered his mouth as he mumbled his answer. “No, I don’t think so. Just send me a bill.”

 “Ain’t necessary. Dr. Bradley wants it. So we’re going to paint it over and sell it to him for seventy-five bucks. We’ll give you twenty-five if you want.”

 “I don’t know what the hell I’d need the money for. My damn daughters won’t let me do anything anyway… Hell, keep it. And tell Bradley I hope it brings him as much luck as it brought me.”

 “Is that good or bad luck?”

 Damned if I know, my friend. Damn if I know.”

 The inside of Doc’s house had not been so quiet since the fall of 1953, when he and his closest friend moved into the house and set up the practice. Ten months after Doc got married in 1956, and six months after his associate moved to Miami, the Kraun’s were blessed with twin daughters, Elsa and Beth, named for their beloved mother, Elizabeth. For years the house bustled with loads of patients and the noise of two wild overactive girls.

 But then in 1972, when Elizabeth died, the two girls tamed their personalities, sacrificed their younger friends, and took it upon themselves to care for their father. Although he was hardly an old man at the time, the two girls watch his diet, scolded him about drinking and smoking, scheduled his office calls so he would not be too overworked. In short, Doc’s daughters attempted to preserve what life he had left by not letting him have a life.

 *And you’ve been running my life ever since,* Doc thought as he gazed at the picture of him and the girls taken shortly after Elizabeth’s death. On the same shelf set a current picture of the two ladies at age forty-four. *Christ! You’re getting to be as homely as your mother.* He turned the picture toward the wall.

 The sound of the back door opening and heavy footsteps in the kitchen preceded the voice of Galvez, the gardener, calling out, “Hey, Doc! You home?”

 “In here, Galvie. The living room.”

 When his mother became ill, Galvez worked out a deal with Doc to do some gardening in exchange for services rendered. Even though his mother had now been dead over ten years, the self-proclaimed descendent of Spanish royalty remained too devoted to give up working for Doc. Not willing to take money from Doc outright, Galvez accepted other favors that Doc could do for him, such as co-signing loans and letting him assist his children in getting an education.

 “What are you doing, Doc?”

 “Eulogizing myself.”

 “Como?”

 “Ah, nevermind? You’re late. You were supposed to be here at eight-o’clock. It’s now twenty after ten.”

 “Sorry, Doc. I had to mix up some plant food and I ran out of sugar.”

 “Sugar? I’m going to have the fattest plants in the South.”

 “It’s from an old family formula. Anyway, I’ve got those junipers you wanted put in and the crushed marble for the trees out front.”

 Doc slipped his hands into his pockets and stood right in front of Galvez. “I don’t suppose you’d be needing any help with any of that.”

 “No, it’s all light work. I got the holes dug for the bushes already and a wheel barrow for the rock.” Galvez turned and walked toward the back door.

 “I’d at least feel better if you’d let me pay you something.”

 “You pay me plenty.”

 “Look, I’m not an invalid. I can carry my weight.”

 “You just stay inside where it’s cool and enjoy your retirement.”

 After Galvez walked out of earshot, Doc said, “Some retirement. A morgue is just as cool and a lot more people to keep you company.”

 Staring through the curtain, Doc watched Galvez carry out his work, and build up a good honest day’s sweat. *Someday you’ll be put out to pasture and your family won’t even let you pot plants in your bathroom.*

 When the phone rang, Doc didn’t answer it right away. But after twelve bells he figured he either needed to answer it or shoot it. “Ben Kraun… Hello, Elsa…” The tone of his voice became one of annoyance, which the caller should have detected immediately. “Yes, they took it down this morning… No, I didn’t help them, as much as I wanted to… I sent all the records to Bradley and Huber last week… I know you don’t like Huber, but he’s a darn good doctor… Then don’t go to him… No, that’s all right, I don’t have anything to say to her… Elsa?… Hello, Beth… What?… Why would I take a nap? I just woke up four hours ago… I slept ten hours last night. If I get anymore sleep I’m libel to hibernate… I’m having pizza for supper… I know what it does to me. The same thing prunes do, only it tastes better… What time?… No, you can’t come over then… Because that’s right in the middle of my nap… Oh, all right. I’ll see you at four… Me, too. Bye.”

 By mid-afternoon the sun baked down pretty hard on anyone outside. Galvez kept his sleeves rolled up a bit, but he pulled his hat down tight on his head to keep the glaring rays off his face. His collar showed no signs of the tiniest dry spot as sweat pour down the sides of his face and neck.

 Doc slowly snuck up behind his handy gardener as Galvez conversed with a bed of roses. “What’s the matter?” Galvez inquired of the flowers. “Are you thirsty? I’ve got some real good juice for you today.”

 Watching and listening for a moment, Doc finally couldn’t help but laugh. “What’s the matter, Galvie? No one to talk to?”

 Galvez jumped to his feet and turned to the good doctor, embarrassed about his conversation. “Jesus, Doc. You scared the hell out of me!”

 “Oh, I’m sorry. I hope I didn’t scare your little friends into early fall.”

 “Come on, Doc. You should know that talking to plants is good for them.”

 The withering roses and brown spots on the leaves caused Doc to laugh a bit more. “From the looks of these plants you’ve been on a vow of silence until today.”

 “Oh, they’ll be all right. They just need a little bit of my plant food.”

 “Better make it a pound of beef. Those roses have had it. It’s just been too dry and hot.”

 Galvez ignored Doc’s sarcastic remarks and started pouring some pink liquid from an old Coke bottle near the roots of the withering flowers.

 Doc still could not resist comment. “Is that the pause that refreshes, Galvie?”

 “In a manner of speaking.” He emptied the bottle. “There. Now in about twenty minutes they’ll be good enough to cut for your girlfriend.”

 “They’re good enough for my daughters right now. What’s in that stuff, anyway?”

 “Sorry, Doc. But would you tell a patient how to treat himself?”

 “All the time, but they never listen. I think I saw some stuff like that at Wal-Marts in with the other garden chemicals.”

 “No, sir. I’ve got the exclusive on this stuff.”

 “Yeah, well if it’s so good, why don’t you use if on that dying cypress tree over by the garage.”

 “I did.”

 “Well,” Doc said as he turned toward the garage, “why isn’t it…” He stopped mid-sentence when he caught a glimpse of the young cypress tree shooting straight up and practically sparkling with green. “Is that the same tree?”

 “Si, senor.”

 “When… When did you treat it?”

 “Just this morning.”

 Doc walked over to the tree and stared at it as if he had seen it rise from the dead. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

 “You don’t even have a pizza or the makings of a pizza in the house.” Elsa searched the cupboards and the refrigerator for anything that she could use to cook for her father’s supper.

 “That’s right,” Doc answered. “I’m having it delivered. If you two are staying for supper then I’ll have to order an extra one because I can eat a whole one by myself.”

 “Father!” Beth shrieked. “That would kill you.”

 “Why? It didn’t kill me last Saturday, or last Thursday, either.”

 Elsa, who always took charge first, gave Doc a stare with hands on hips and her head shaking back and forth. “I can see that we never should have moved to Pensacola. We’re just too far away.”

 Almost undetectable to the girls, Doc muttered, “Not far enough.”

 “But now that you’re not conducting your practice here, there would be no problem for us to move back in with you.”

 “Oh, no!” Doc answered quickly. “That just wouldn’t work our anymore. You two have your own lives to lead, and I have mine. I’ve got my new girlfriend to think about.”

 “What new girlfriend?”

 “The first woman I find, young or old, that likes old men and fresh pizza. Or even visa versa.”

 The two ladies pulled their father down to sit at the kitchen table. The speech they prepared to deliver was nothing Doc had not heard before. “Wait!” he said, and then stood again. “If you’re going to give me the same old bullshit about me being in the autumn years and that I should sit back and enjoy, and take care of myself, forget it. I’m not in the autumn years of my life. It is now winter, by my clock, and I am not going to sit around and wait to die. Besides, I am taking care of myself. I’m a doctor, for God’s sake! Who better than me knows what I can or cannot do? Hell, if I died today, I’d have out-lived the national average by three years. I think that’s pretty damn good.”

 Beth put her hands over her ears. “Father, I wish you wouldn’t swear.”

 “I’m not swearing. I’m cursing. When you swear you cross your heart and hope to die. When you curse you just wish everyone else would.”

 “Present company excluded, I hope.’

 “That depends on whether you’re going to move in here or not.”

 Elsa stared at Beth and then both stared at their father. Each hoped to say just the right thing to make him see the light… Their light.

 But Doc would not give in to their demands. Even though he knew they would be over at least every other day to try to run his life, he felt he had to separate himself from them to maintain his sanity.

 “Look, girls. I’m an old man who’s not dead yet, just ready to take it a little easy. And in the process I’d like to be able to do a few things that I never had time to do when I was practicing medicine. I’ve spent the last ten years treating other older citizens, and I’ve seen what happens when their families make them become much older than they really are.”

 Beth put her hand on her father’s shoulder. “But, Father, what about your health? We don’t want anything to happen to you.”

 Elsa joined in, “We’re just afraid you’ll have a heart attack or a stroke, and we won’t be around to help.”

 “Who’s the doctor here? I know more than anybody how healthy I am… Now, do I order two pizzas, or just one?”

 Although still not in complete agreement, the daughters answered in unison, “Two.”

 Doc walked out of the kitchen to his office, feeling some sense of accomplishment, but somehow he did not yet taste complete satisfaction. Then, as he dialed the phone to place the order, an idea crept in that made him smile. “Hello, Walt. This is Ben Kraun. Could you send over two large thin crust pizzas with the works?… Yeah, and three Cokes, one diet… Right. Oh, yeah, and put anchovies on one of them… Yeah… What?… I know I never order anchovies. I hate the damn things… So do my daughters.”

 A plastic five-gallon container set on the ground at the end of one of the rows of sweet corn in Doc’s garden. In the middle of the corn patch stood the two men examining a very healthy stalk that seemed to stand out from the rest.

 “Damn,” Doc puffed. “I never would’ve believed it.”

 “Why not? You saw the tree and the roses.”

 “Yeah, but I’d swear this turned green right before our eyes.”

 “It did.”

 “You’ve got to tell me what that stuff is.”

 “I already told you. It’s a secret, handed down to me from my papa, who had it handed down to him from his papa.”

 “What’s in it?” Doc asked. Spanish fly?”

 “No.”

 “Listen, if you don’t tell me, when I die I’m going to haunt every garden you take care of… Besides, how am I going to profit from it. I’m a doctor. I’ve got surgeons hands, not a green thumb.”

 “Well, the truth is I’m not really sure what’s in it.”

 “Why? You make it, don’t you?”

 “Some of it. I make the carrot juice from the carrots and the greens. Then I puree rose hips, add in the sugar and maple tree sap. But there is something in the water that I use. Something that I can’t explain.”

 “What about the water?”

 “Well, it comes out of a spring about fifteen miles east of here that runs through my wife’s cousin’s property. It’s not real clear water, but it has a clean taste.”

 “You’ve drunk the water?”

 “Sure! Gallons of it.”

 “Have you ever tried just pouring the water on the plants?”

 “Yeah. But nothing ever happens. It’s only when you mix the other ingredients with it.”

 Doc sniffed the jar they had been using. “It almost smells like elderberry wine.”

 Again, Doc and Galvez stared at the green corn stalk and then at the container on the ground. Their eyes sparkled with a gleam that meant the wheels were turning in their respective brains.

 After a silent pause, Doc looked at Galvez and said, “Take me to that spring.

 About ten feet across and three to four feet deep, the spring in question cut through a vacant piece of land behind Galvez’s wife’s cousin’s livestock farm. Like Galvez said, the water looked cloudy, (not dirty, but more gray or silver.)

 “Are there any fish in here?” Doc asked as he gawked into the water.

 “I don’t think so. But then again, I’ve never fished here.”

 Doc pointed to the canvas bag that Galvez carried. “Hand me one of the jars we brought.”

 Galvez reached into the bag, pulled out a quart jar, and handed it to Doc. After unscrewing the lid, Doc slowly dipped the jar into the stream. When he drew it up, he studied it carefully, sniffed it, and then hesitantly took a small taste.

 “You’re right,” Doc said after he swallowed the water. “It tastes good. Almost like mineral water… But there’s something else I can’t quite put my finger on.”

 “I’ve been drawing water out of this spring since I was a kid, and as far as I know no one else has ever discovered it… Not even my wife’s family.”

 “You mean they don’t even know it’s here?”

 “Oh, they know it’s here. But they just think it’s another old creek.”
 All sorts of thoughts ran through Doc’s mind as to what gave the water the qualities it had, but nothing seemed to make any sense. *No matter what it takes, I’m going to find what makes it work.* “Fill up that tea jar, then we’ll stop by your place and get the other ingredients. We can take everything to my basement lab.”

 “I’m going to have to pass this afternoon, Doc. I’ve got to run Teresa to her mother’s down in Panama City.”

 “Can’t you get out of it?”

 “Not if I want to live. Not to worry, though. All the ingredients are setting on the table in your own tool shed. I brought them over this morning after I saw how impressed you were yesterday.”

 “When will you be back?”

 “Tomorrow morning. I’ll be in at eight.”

 “You mean ten, don’t you?”

 “I’ll be there on time.”

 “Doc? Where are you?”

 Galvez walked through the entire house, even into Doc’s bedroom, but the house seemed deserted. While he walked through the living room again, he peeked out the window and noticed Doc standing outside next to the flowerbed in the backyard.

 “Hey, Doc! I made it!”

 Doc kept his head down, barely acknowledging what Galvez said. “What?”

 “I said, I made it. It’s ten minutes ‘til eight.”

 “Oh, yeah.” His eyes never strayed from the ground below. “That’s nice.”

 “What’s the matter, Doc?” Galvez looked down to the point on which Doc was so focused. The little piece of ground had been a flowerbed, but now it looked like a bed of dirt. “What are you looking at?”

 “I tried out a more concentrated formula.”

 “On what?”

 Doc pointed toward the dirt. “The flower bed.”

 Galvez then remembered that just the day before there had been flowers growing in the spot that now appeared to be nothing but dirt. He dropped to his knees and started digging at the dirt until he pulled out a handful of smooth bulbs with tiny buds sprouting from each. “Santa Maria!”

 “I’ve never seen anything like it before in my life. They grew backwards… They grew backwards into the ground.”

 Smiles and slow brewing laughter emanating from the thunderstruck gardener. “Do you know what this means? My formula makes things young again.”

 “Our formula. This latest configuration is part yours and part mine.”

 “It doesn’t matter. We’re going to be rich.”

 “Now, keep your shirt on, Galvie. So far all we know is we’ve discovered a serum that makes plants grow backwards.”

 “Yeah, but it’s a start.”

 “Let me do some more tests today and mix up some more concentrated formula. I’ve added aloe vera juice and boiled out some of the water. I’ll test it on different animal forms. You know, some insects and maybe some mice, or even some of the neighborhood cats.”

 “Hey, now, don’t kill a cat. I love cats.”

 “Don’t worry. There’s nothing in this solution that would kill anything. In the meantime, I want you to dig out anything you can find at your place about this formula… an old handwritten recipes or anything that tells you how old it is… Anything. Then bring it all back here. I’ll be down in the basement.”

 “Sure thing, Doc. We really got something here, haven’t we.”

 “I don’t know for sure, but I’d say we are definitely in the ball park.”

 In his basement lab, Doc leaned back away from the table where he had conducted a series of experiments and stared at everything with only one eyebrow raised. He picked up a mini-cassette recorder and pressed the record button. “After several different tests on the formula, I have made only limited conclusions. Boiling out about half of the water seems to make the formula the strongest. The high temperatures apparently had no adverse effect on the elements that return certain molecular structures to their pre-adolescent phase. If anything, the heat has enhanced its effect.”

 Doc stopped the recorder while he wiped sweat from his forehead, but then he started it again. “However, the tests on the animals have been less than consistent. I was successful in transforming a jar of mosquitoes, which seem to love the sweet mixture, into a batch of squiggling larvae. But the honeybees, which also went crazy for the stuff, showed absolutely no signs of age regression. The houseflies were even more bad news. Some turned to maggots, others just stayed houseflies.”

 An old tomcat sat on the floor next to the table, slurping up a small bowl of milk. Doc reached down and stroked the cat’s back. “I even injected the formula into a cat with absolutely no effect. At least, for Galvie’s sake, I didn’t seem to hurt him. He still has a healthy appetite. After studying a slide of the substance, I have identified a cell that I’ve never seen before. It is never present when I look at the ingredients individually, but once they are combined it is always there. I think if I had an electron microscope I would find that the cellular structure is more complex with the concentrated formula, as if the hydrogen level had some effect on it. I think it’s safe to say that I am still completely confused.”

 Doc heard footsteps upstairs, followed by the shrill voice of one of his daughters calling out, “Father? Are you hear?”

 “Damn!” he muttered. “Lord couldn’t you have given me one more day without them.” He walked up the stairs. “I’m coming. I’m coming.”

 When Doc met the ladies in the kitchen, he could see they carried with them an armload of brochures and pamphlets. Suspicious, he asked them, “What brings you here today?”

 “Father,” Elsa spoke first, “we have the most exciting news.”

 “Oh, yeah?”

 “Yesterday and this morning, Beth and I looked at several high quality retirement villages, all of which would be perfect for you. One of them offered you free room and board if you’d agree to help out the resident doctor.”

 “Where are these places?”

 “Well…”

 Beth filled in Elsa’s hesitation. “They’re all right around Pensacola. And they’re beautiful.”

 “Plus,” Elsa continued, “you’d be surrounded by people of your own caliber.”

 “What’s that?” Doc asked. “Old? Fat? Which is it?”

 “Old, of course. I mean, retired. We made appointments tomorrow for you to come with us and look these places over.”

 Beth continued, “Elsa and I know that once you see them, you’ll fall in love with each and every place.”

 Doc’s teeth started grinding together, and he pulled in a corner of his lip and chewed on it while his breathing increased. He wanted to say a thousand things, but he couldn’t actually speak a word. All he could do was stand there and stare at the women that sprang from his own loins.

 “Well, Father?” Elsa asked. “What do you think?”

 “Excuse me a moment,” he finally said. “I think I left something burning downstairs.”

 Leaving his daughters in the kitchen, Doc stomped down the stairs doing everything he could do to keep from putting a fist through the wall. When he got to the bottom of the stairs he saw Galvez sitting by the table petting a calico kitten while the old tomcat remained curled up by his feet.

 “How long have you been here?” Doc asked.

 “Long enough. I saw their car outside so I came in the outside door. You’re not going to move to one of those places, are you?”

 “Hell, no! The only thing I’m considering is whether to disinherit them or kill them.”

 “Now, Doc. They’re your children. You know you love them.”

 “Yeah, but they’ve done one thing that separates them from children. They grew up. And they grew up ugly, too… Just like their mother use to be when she gave up caring about herself and polluted her body with booze and tranquilizers… Yeah, at one time they were beautiful children. But that was a long time ago… Too long ago.”

 Galvez set the cat on the floor and pulled some papers out of his pocket. “I found a couple things.”

 “Like what?”

 “An old letter from my great-great-grandfather to my great-grandfather listing all the ingredients necessary to make the formula. It’s dated 1919 and it’s written in Spanish. And along with the letter he enclosed a map of the spring in connection with other landmarks.”

 “Let me see that thing.” Doc took the map from Galvez and scrutinized it carefully. “Is that the stream here?”

 “Yeah. Where he drew a circle is where you and I were standing yesterday.”

 “Uh huh…” Doc rubbed his chin while he continued to study the map. “Look here, Galvie.”

 “You find a clue?”

 “That stream runs all the way up to this larger body of water here.”

 “So?”

 “So, this big spring up here is otherwise known today as Ponce De Leon Springs.”

 Galvez took a hard swallow. “The real fountain of youth?”

 “Well, not exactly. He looked for it somewhere in the Bahamas and never found it. Looks like he searched in the wrong place and didn’t have the right ingredients… For that matter, I don’t think we do, either.”

 “Not much success, huh?”

 “Some yes, some no, but nothing conclusive. Turned a bunch of mosquitoes into larvae. But I drank it and I’m still as old as ever.”

 “Maybe we ought to package it as the only elderberry wine that gets rid of mosquitoes, sort of.”

 The little calico kitten jumped up on the table and started sniffing at the jar that did had some of the formula in it. Now the kitten just licked the side of the jar.

 “Where did that kitten come from?” Doc asked.

 “Must have come from old Mrs. Graveman’s house. It’s the spitting image of her old cat, Enella.”

 Doc picked the cat up and petted it. “It may look like Enella, but it couldn’t belong to her litter.”

 “Why not?”

 “Because I fixed Enella for Mrs. Graveman last summer.” Doc looked at the jar that the kitten had been licking. “Galvie, there was a dab of formula in that jar earlier.”

 “The cat must have drunk it.”

 And then it came to Doc. He picked up the cat and looked between its legs. “Jesus Christ!… Sweet days of Heaven!”

 “What is it, Doc?”

 “This kitten has small scar near the genitals, just like it would have if it had been fixed… This cat isn’t Enella’s kitten… It’s Enella… The formula works.”

 “But what about the tomcat?”

 “I don’t know why I didn’t think about this earlier. The mosquitoes were all females. The bees were all males. The flies were assorted. And all the plants have qualities of both sexes. The old tomcat is a male, and Enella is female.”

 “Doc, I don’t get it.”

 “That cell that I found in the formula must only interact with female hormones, no matter what the species… The female hormones stimulate the cell and then it goes to work, until all the cells in the body are at the larvae, seed, or pre-adolescent stage.”

 “You mean if we used that on a human female, they would end up…”

 “About five or six years old… It works, all right… But only on females.” A glazed stare came over Doc’s eyes and the corners of his mouth raised ever so slightly.

 “What are you think, Doc?”

 Doc grabbed a container from the shelf and headed upstairs.

 “Where are you going, Doc?”

 “Stay here… I’ll be right back.”

 As Doc climbed the stairs, Galvez thought he heard him mumble something about his daughters being beautiful.

 Upstairs the two sisters sat at the table, looking over the pamphlets and chattered endlessly. When they saw their father, they stopped and looked at him with some anticipation. “Have you been thinking about what we said?” Elsa asked.

 “Yes, as a matter of fact I have. And I would really like going and looking at those places tomorrow.”

 Both Elsa and Beth leaped out of their chairs and cheered at his decision while they hugged and kissed him. In unison, they cried, “We just know you’ll love them.”

 “Oh, I’m sure I will.”

 Elsa spotted the bottle that Doc carried with him and inquired, “What do we have here?”

 “Something I’ve been brewing downstairs.” His earlier smile still in place, Doc raised the bottle with both hands. “How would you ladies like some elderberry wine?”

 *“Who is he?”*

 *The nurse didn’t even look back. “That’s Mike. Remember?”*

 *“Not Mike. The other man.”*

 *“And really, Mike, you shouldn’t be standing right there while I’m doing this.” She hadn’t heard what I said. “He has staph.”*

 *Mike slapped a hand over his mouth. “It’s not MRSA, is it?”*

 *“No, it’s not MRSA.” The nurse looked at me. “Is it?”*

 *My God! She didn’t even know. “No, it’s not MRSA. It’s a slow growing, highly resilient staphylococcus bacteria.”*

 *The nurse’s eyes stuck to mine. “Are you a doctor?”*

 *What a question? “No. I’ve just heard all the data about this little bug I’ve got.” The man behind Mike bowed his head. “Can we please get to the man behind Mike?”*

 *The light in the room failed to illuminate the dark figure’s face. He stretched his right arm out even farther and then dropped it to his side. A flash of light made me close my eyes…*

 *…and open them to a new room… a dark, dismal room, lit only by a desk lamp and the light from the hallway. A woman in a lab coat held a pen and a clipboard, jotting down a few scribbles on the paper.*

 *“He’s not happy with his new surroundings.”*

 *I swallowed and tried to establish a point of reference.*

 *“Do you want him on a restricted diet? A few days on tepid water and toast without butter will make the lure of pizza like heroin to him.”*

 *“What do I always say?” I couldn’t think of anything else.*

 *“Restricted diet it is.”*

**The Soul Nourished**

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 *“The feast it is ready which the careful Titus*

 *Hath ordain’d to an honorable end…”*

 *Titus Andronicus*

 The night and all its blots on the landscape, broken only by interspersed beams from the obscured moon, devoured the day earlier than it would have a trimester earlier. Oaks, once brushing lightly together in days of spring and summer, now clattered and knocked in the force of the wind rushing from the shore up the rocky barrier. Only the sound of an aged owl rose enough to bear witness to the night. Its prey lay in protective nests and miniature caverns in the dirt, so the stern-faced fowl could only declare its domain, not assert it. More than a stone’s throw from the edge of the woods, the crashing of water upon the shore matched the rhythmic gusts of air flowing in from the sea.

 Twixt the rocky coast and the woods lay a road carved into the landscape as an artificial design, striped with chutes of grass now dead, brown in the light and gray by the moon, covering only the space of ground not trod by wheels or hooves. To one side lay the fringe leading into the darkened glen, the dismal home of what beast or fowl may stalk or be stalked. To the other, only a narrow stretched of cover thrived until it, too, disappeared onto the rocky rim of the water’s edge, where no foliage can survive the salt spray and only driftwood sprinkles its mineral ground.

 ‘Twas on this path I found myself traveling in a carriage, lighted by lamps not adequate to see a safe distance ahead as the equine powerhouses pulled faster than I truly desired. Were it not for the occasional patch of lunar glow, the landscape round would not have been seen, except by creatures eyeing my tasty form, wondering how they might separate me from my coach and rend me to morsels for their hungry packs and prides. My fortune rested in that upon my earlier departure, my friend and confidant warned, “Take heed, comrade. Carry with you a pistol, not to guard against robber but against wolves and worse.” After, he handed me a pistol meant for dueling, not protecting. Was it one shot to shield me from my fate? And if spent, how would I secure another? I had no lead or powder.

 The road swelled to a point to seemingly stop midair. But once the peak was met, the dim outline of a house took center of my view, and I cast my eyes on the dark hall. No stones adorned the mansion that I could tell. A hulking wreck, it stood four floors above the ground, with three square towers tapering to a small flat spot atop, and a rail around the stand as though a widow could gaze at the sea for the ship of her man. But no widow stood in wait, no man watched the spray, and no host eyed my approach. There may have been windows, sure, there must have been windows. Albeit, no light peered through to suggest the stirring of souls within. Only one light cast a dim ray through the transom o’er the door, and so faint there could be only a candle or two to feed the glow.

 A rustle of leaves startled the horses, now but a furlong in distance from my destination. I grabbed the reins tightly and shook them as I urged them forward. They hesitated but a minute and took again to their risky speed, veering out on the grass only slightly before steering back to center of the path. Was it wolves or worse that shook their faith?

 The carriage no longer needed my guiding hand as it pulled into the drive of the mansion. The horses slowed to a steady trot, and finally fell to a stop near the door from whence light gazed from above, looking at me and my mode of travel. The coach no longer buffeted my being, but my trembling hands and knees attested to long abuse on the road, so far removed from Boston, my point of origin some two days past. The door before which I stood sported two brass handles, ornate in design but dingy in existence. A great steel knocker rested high on the left door, and I raised it but a few inches to let it drop three times against the plate. A heavy thud echoed in the halls behind the door in a thunderous wave suggesting a greater hall stood within than what lay without, and directly a pair of footsteps faded into earshot. The door opened, releasing a breath of air smelling of stale meat and wine, and seemed to beckon – before a dark figure of a man emerged from the shadows carrying the only light from the inner foyer.

 “Who calls,” the dark man spoke, “at so late a’ hour?”

 I spoke my name and that I had been sent of Phillip Shayne, Esquire, of Boston. I offered my apologies for arriving so late, but the trip proved to be a more arduous task than first expected. Sans a clear view of the man I inquired if he was Adrian Fitzweary, the owner of the mansion.

 “Heavens, no!” the man declared as he held the candle to his face, black as coal. “I’m Arthur, Mr. Fitzweary’s house butler. Come in. You’ll catch your death in this cold.”

 I entered the foyer and the great door thundered in place behind me. Arthur efficiently stripped my coat from me and laid it across his arm, yet I felt his concern of the cold outside was not adequately laid to rest inside, the frost from own breath attesting to the temperature of the interior. Was it always this cold?

 “The fire in the library has gone out, this being so late. You was expected earlier, so Mr. Fitzweary retired when he supposed you delayed.” His dialect only occasionally bespoke his lack of refinement. “But I kept a fire in the upstairs quarters. You’d be warm enough, I suppose.”

 I took out my watch and spied the time, noting it was only half past eight. Mr. Fitzweary must have tired from waiting for my arrival.

 “He always takes his sleep at seven in the winter. His lungs don’t like the night air. And Miss Cressy always retires at eight.” – the daughter Cressida, I presumed. “Yes, sir. Only *I* calls her Cressy.” He strolled to the base of the circular stairway and rested his boot on the bottom step. “If you would come to your room I’ll fetch your bags and bring you a hot cup of tea.”

 I oscillated my head in some scanning motion and inquired on the presence of others of his sort. The bonded man swung around with the grace of an aged gate on badly oxidized hinges, and continued up the spiraling passage. “I am the last.” The last, said I, wondering as to the disposition of the rest of the household staff. “I am the last.” He spoke not another word as we ascended the stairs.

The paintings on the wall of my room bore faces of people I conjectured long dead based on the frills and collars they wore. They smiled not, nor did the eyes perceive. Each held a gaze as dead as the body who posed for the portrait. Each, that is, save one – a portrait of a young girl, no more than sixteen, a face as pale and smooth as ivory, and hair auburn like autumn oak leaves. Her chest expressed a hint of roundness beneath the throat and collar, but the artist made no suggestion of voluptuousness. She was a schoolgirl, sat in a chair and extolled not to breathe while he copied her image and avoided her womanhood. Only her lips spoke beyond innocence and her eyes beckoned beyond desire. She stared at me from over my bed, wondering of the day to follow.

The hand of Mr. Fitzweary felt that of a man of his years, soft and cracked with the strange presence of bone and sinew less apparent on my own hand. He withdrew it from me on the mention of my name and slowly turned to the table set before us. “My daughter… Cressida,” he spoke her name as though princes may have uttered it, and his crippled fingers suggested her location at the table, her hands neatly folded in her lap. “I am a widower, now approaching eleven years.”

Like the cooing of a dove, the voice of Cressida floated between her father’s words, “It is twelve, father.”

 “What? Twelve?” he asked, as surprised as if having never heard it before. “Are you sure? It can’t be twelve.”

“I beg forgiveness, Father,” spoke she as she bowed her head and stared blankly at her hands. “But it has been twelve. I was but seven years old only days before, and you had promised me a party. Until my mothers –” she stopped and did wring her hands at what surely was a painful memory.

“But we did have the party,” the old man said, remembering and proud of it. “I served one of our finest cuts. You are quite sure it was twelve?”

She only nodded. A hint of rhododendron brushed my nostrils and even dropped onto my tongue, a taste strange to the mouth but welcome in this setting. I could only imagine her bare shoulder, for the dress she wore at breakfast, a daisy yellow dulled by wear, was quite proper and tightly fitted. I could not feel the eyes or see the lips while she remained as if in prayer for a period past the recounting of years since her mother’s demise. The fragrance of rhododendrons could only be hers since no centerpiece adorned the great mahogany table round which we would sit – and as only the palest of the flower carries the sweet scent, so did this insipid blossom exude such a lovely bouquet.

“Sit, my friend,” Mr. Fitzweary all but commanded. “You will join us in a bowl of hot gruel.” I spotted the tarnished silver spoon resting in a wooden bowl before the lovely Cressida floating atop the pasty substance her father had just offered, and I thanked the old man for his offer as I took my place at which no bowl graced the setting. I told him I was not normally given to hot cereals – mush, as in my thoughts. “My apologies, sir,” Fitzweary said, now himself perched at the head of the table. “We are not normally disposed to such a breakfast as I am sure you are accustomed. I fear only gruel and bread is all I have to offer.” Fitzweary crumbled a crust of bread in his bowl. “You are sent of Mr. Phillip Shayne, then.” His unkempt moustache retained much of the mush and he uncaringly brought his lower lip up to clean the remaining morsels. “Why did he send you?” Beads of spittle and food stretched inside his mouth as he spoke.

I sought pardon that we should not discuss business at the table, and I laid eyes on his whilst I tilted my head toward Cressida.

“Come, come,” he said, now wiping his mouth with a cloth he had draped over his leg. “My daughter is no stranger to business. When the house was full of servants, and she just a girl in her adolescence, she directed the duties of the day. That is, except the assigning of meals. This I always have taken joy in composing.” He dropped his cloth to his lap and continued to eat. Before he brought the next spoon to his lips he said, “So, speak. What says Phillip Shayne which cannot be said in a note?”

I stretched out my hand to the bread tray and took a slice, while my hesitation at proceeding must have seemed clear.

“Nevermind,” Fitzweary continued, feeling my reticence. “I can speak what you so plainly wish to avoid, although it is the thrust of your journey.” He annunciated as though reading a letter, yet pulled the words out of the air. “It is with great regret Mr. Shayne has determined he may no longer represent me in matters of my concern. He would have journeyed here himself to tell me, but circumstances prohibit his making such a trip as this time.” I interjected that his son’s wife was with child and he dared not leave her. Adroitly I was able to continue with other specifics – that I was sent also to deliver all the documents he has gathered during his representation of Mr. Fitzweary, and would serve to explain them, and suggest other council who would be more – I could not find a polite word to finish my thought or Mr. Shayne’s. The old man finished my sentence. “More affordable?” I gave one complete nod downward.

Fitzweary continued to eat, though I could not look upon him in doing so. I had nearly forgotten the presence of Cressida, who I noticed could also not look upon her father whilst he ate. Her own tender chewing took a more delicate aspect as her lips parted ever so slightly and coaxed the food into her mouth. The muscles in her throat moved rhythmically on her swallows to match the stroke of her spoon in the bowl. Arthur’s entrance with my tea even went unnoticed while I voyeuristically watched Cressida’s consumption.

“This is no surprise,” Fitzweary said, finally setting his spoon on the table, leaving at least half the bowl uneaten. “You see, I am without finances. My ability to work has dried up many years ago. If I had but bore a son,” he said as he looked to Cressida.

She dropped her spoon and fell to prayer again, “Oh, father.”

“My dear daughter. ‘Tis not your sin to have been born a helpless female.” Again his eyes met mine. “For my abilities as a father dried up even longer ago, a transgression that cannot be forgiven insomuch as it haunts an old man into his twilight. My wife died unfulfilled on so many fronts. I would have rather taken on her guilt than what I did take from her.” His words became enigmatic, a puzzle I was not sure I wished to solve. What – I could barely ask him – what had he taken from her? Now it was he who fell into prayer. “I fear – her soul.”

The day remained gray, the sun having surrendered to a bevy of clouds too great to break and too vast to cast down. The trees providing cover around the mansion pressed against the outer walls on all sides as though the wind rushed in from every direction. A flash of daisy yellow floated across the doorway accompanied by no sound, no steps, no crinkle of fabric. I rushed to the door hoping to catch a glimpse of whom I dreamed was the lovely Cressida. But to no avail did my dash result, for no one stood in the hall or ascended the stairs as should have been in the span it took me to arrive there. My heart sank at the missed opportunity, craving the smell of rhododendron and wishing to feast on her pale eyes and auburn hair.

In the foyer a sound rose from behind a wall – the tapping, pounding, cracking of a tool against wood. The noise continued as I walked the hall to a doorway behind the steps. From there the sound came, tap, pound, and crack, each time hitting its mark and stopping for another series. A faint yet real light radiated from beyond the door. It shone on the rotten steps leading downward, not impressing me with confidence on their sturdiness. I put my weight on the steps, careful to not apply all my weight so quickly, and moved down, all the while the noise beginning and ending, beginning and ending. The order was mixed, and now another noise joined the trio – that of a saw, a small saw cutting something stronger than wood.

The closer I drew to the room the more noises I heard intermixed with the rapping and the sawing. The labored breathing of a man, perhaps an old man, took a rhythm with the cutting and the hammering. And there was but one more sound I heard – the splatter of liquid on the floor. I reached toward the knob of the door to push it open, but my heart leapt in its cavity at a sudden crash behind me. Instinctively I spun to see the eyes of a dark gray cat having knock down a small wooden box from a shelf above. In front of it lay the reason of its pounce, a small rodent now twitching into its death as the feline voraciously tore into its neck. The yellow eyes of the cat glowed as though the sun shone through two pinprick holes while it smacked its lips on the meat of its prey and stared at me as though I would be an even tastier morsel.

When I turned again to the door the light had been extinguished and the sounds no longer emanated there. I twisted the knob and tried to open it, but to no avail as it was locked – locked as by a plank dropped into supports. An odd smell crept into my senses – the odor of freshly cut meat, the sting of blood, and – rhododendrons.

Old Fitzweary sat at the table in the dining hall with knife and fork in hand, but Cressida’s absence more urgently caught my attention. Two other settings besides the old man’s graced the table. The apparent invitation notwithstanding, I had no desire to continue honoring them as a guest in this house, so I begged pardon of Mr. Fitzweary that I might take my leave of him. “Nonsense. You shall join us for the evening meal. It’s at least a half a day’s ride to the nearest town with accommodations.” Not more than a day ago I had made the journey and assured him I could do it again. Now his eyes came up to meet mine. “I’m afraid that is quite impossible. Your horses will serve a greater good, as will you.” But my horses were the property of Mr. Shayne, and they would be returned to him when the journey was done. I moved next to the aged patriarch of no means and laid my hand on the spires of his chair, now insisting he call Arthur and have him bring forth my horses and carriage. The laugh coming from Fitzweary discomforted me greatly. “Arthur shan’t be joining us again.” He indicated the chair with his hand. “Sit. Cressida will bring the feast soon.”

My hand, on its own, reached inside my coat and pulled the pistol from my belt. My throat closed in as I now strained in louder tones to discover what had become of my horses and that, if need be, old Fitzweary himself would take me to them. Howbeit, the unwavering fool never hesitated nor took amazement at my action. He stared at my shaking hand, a shaking I had never before noticed – at least not before coming to Fitzweary mansion. It was not from fear, yet it uncontrollably continued. He laughed as he watch it shake, not fearing a sudden twitch of my finger. “There is a weakness in your extremities,” said he, “is there not?”

I pulled the gun closer to my face and watched as it still shook with my fingers and wrist. *In the name of Heaven! What have you done?* I thought I spoke it, but the sound never escaped the synapses of my mind.

“A decade past I was forced to make choices that plagued my soul. Throughout our lives we must take into ourselves much that is repulsive to us. Even you have become a slave to your life in Boston as Arthur. Arthur wasn’t as much a slave to me as to his own guilt these last years, for he, too, took things into himself that wretched his spirit.” Soon the quivering in my legs demanded I sit. I dropped the pistol on the table and fell into the chair at the setting meant for me. “As I progressed in years I became a slave myself, first convinced it was my only course of action. The tobacco crop spoilt because I had no sons to harvest it, and I could not afford to employ hands or buy more slaves – besides, my wife had reservations about the prospect of securing more to our herd because she somehow extrapolated it was a sin. We first slaughtered the cattle, then the horses –” He stopped as he laid down his knife and fork and reached across to take the pistol from before me. “And finally we put the herd that walks on two legs to the ultimate sacrifice.”

The glow of the daisy yellow dress and the smell of rhododendrons preceded the entrance of Cressida, carrying a large meat platter. The aroma of the meat mixed my emotions as I surmised the contents of the tray. *My horses!*

“Your horses live,” Fitzweary said. “I made that mistake before, when in the fall we slaughtered my last mare. That act divorced us from the rest of the world. But you shan’t be allowed to leave. A potion I have perfected over time made from honey and rhododendrons and other narcotics will subdue your strength and enhance your dreams. It mixes best with brandy, but the tea you have affection for works just as well.” I could scarce utter the declaration of his madness, but even if he had not heard, surely he knew it – he had to know it. “I’m not mad. I merely like the taste of the humanity. It is a delicacy that cannot be matched in all the culinary world.” He raised his hand to the tray Cressida placed at the center of our settings. “Taste a morsel. I am quite sure Arthur would be honored.”

Cressida raised the tarnished silver cover, revealing a steaming pile of neatly slice steaks and ground saugages, covered in a smooth brown gravy. I should have been repulsed and would have turned away – but something was amiss. The shape of the meat, the aroma it created, the color it took – this meat was familiar to me. It smelled as that of animal – not a man. Barely able to force anything through my lips I could but say one word to Cressida – venison.

“I assure you,” Mr. Fitzweary said, “it is not venison.”

Cressida turned to Fitzweary. “But it is venison, Father.”

The smile on old Fitzweary’s face faded as he started to fume at the news from Cressida. “Venison? But Arthur? What has become of Arthur?”

“I took the pistol from our guest’s room when Arthur spotted a herd of whitetail in the glen. Providence smiled on us this day, Father, as Arthur was able to bring down a fine buck with the one shot from the pistol.” She seated herself at her place, and for the first time since I had arrived at the mansion, she truly smiled. “I was so thankful to God, I sent Arthur away. Even now he is on one of our guest’s horses, riding to Baltimore – and freedom.”

“Foolish girl!” Fitzweary said, and rose at his place. He looked at his daughter and seemingly contemplated her revelation, wondering how she had come to this. He gazed at the pistol on the table and slowly seated himself once more. In a flow of action I can only tell and hardly remember how it was so easily done, Cressida picked up the pistol from the table, aimed it at her father and pulled the trigger. The shot struck Mr. Fitzweary in the chest and pushed him and his chair back at least a foot, the smoke obscuring dear Cressida following the deed. I could no longer speak, and now could not stand – only stare at the lifeless body of Adrian Fitzweary, blackened blood flowing from the open chest wound. Slumped back into the chair and not falling, his head pointed downward as in prayer.

“Now, Mother,” Cressida said as she reveled in her kill. “Now you may rest. His carcass will feed the vultures, his flesh will nourish the worms, and his bones will bleach in the sun. I say only this over thee, Father. May you rot in hell. May you rot in hell.” She laid down the pistol and sat in her chair. “You must eat, before it gets cold – to endure your strength and lessen the effect of the narcotic.” She picked up her knife and fork, but again looked at me. “Please tell me you will take me away from here. One horse surely may carry the cart.” I gazed at her in awe and nodded toward the pistol expressing a quizzical glance. “I know,” said she, “there was but one shot in the pistol and Arthur used it on the deer.” She took a slice of the venison from the tray and set it on her plate. “I reloaded it. Father never fathomed the skills of this helpless female. Loading a pistol in this household seemed an essential skill. One never knew when he or she would be next on the menu.” She sliced the meat on her plate. “Eat.”

I could not. My head twisted subtly from side to side, my refusal owing to the sight of the dead Adrian Fitzweary. Cressida must have known my apprehension and understood its source. Yet she continued to eat. “This is the least repulsive meal I’ve had in years.”

*A man entered the room, also garbed in a white lab coat, carrying a cup of coffee. “Dr. Marion,” he said to the woman. “Dr. Ray,” he said, this time with me in his sights. His name tag read “Emil Lucius, MD/DO.” He seemed to be sizing me up even as I tried to ascertain his role in the little play I now was an actor. “Let’s go for a walk.”*

*The three exited the dark room to a less dark but still dismal corridor, me following carefully as I remained clueless to our agenda. Dr. Lucius held his coffee cup close to his lips so he could frequent a sip as he walked through the hall. Under the same arm he held a notepad, keeping it tucked so tightly that his white coat bunched near his armpit. In his left hand he grasped a set of keys, I didn’t remember seeing moments before, with his hand turned up closed around a large ring, dangling about thirty keys below. “Did he eat last night?”*

 *The woman keeping step with Dr. Lucius, Dr. Marion, looked at her own notepad, which she held in front of her with both hands. “He’s had some soup, a couple slices of bread, and a glass of milk. I offered him a biscotti this morning, but he turned it down.”*

 *“He probably didn’t know what it was.”*

 *“I’ve given them to him before. He just didn’t seem hungry. Maybe he found something to eat while he was gone. Anyway, Dr. Ray and I had just decided putting him on a restricted diet might be the way to go. They sometimes are more cooperative with no carbs.”*

 *“It’s possible. When they found him in the city he was in the company of a gang from his old neighborhood. His blood alcohol was not too high, but he had definitely been drinking. I’m sure he found food, too.”*

 *“His gang? I wasn’t aware his was a criminal case.”*

 *“I didn’t say it was his gang. I said it was a gang from his old neighborhood.”*

 *Dr. Marion brought her notepad close to her as though she might be hugging it. “I thought this sort of social behavior was being eradicated.”*

 *“Would that we could. Try not to look at this in a stereotypical manner, however. His background is only indicative of his problems – not the plight of those he left behind.”*

 *“Are we going to visit with him today?” I asked. It seemed like the only thing I could come up with to contribute without making a fool of myself.*

 *“No.” Dr. Lucius took another sip of his coffee. “Let him stew about this for a day or two. As soon as he craves human contact again – he’ll let us know.” The Doctor stopped for a moment and looked into his colleague’s eyes. “I understand that you spoke with Felix last Friday.”*

 *“He told you that?” she replied, almost embarrassed.*

 *“Of course, he told me. Everything that affects this facility is in my purview. Did you tell him your conversation was confidential?”*

 *“No. I just didn’t know that he would tell you so quickly.” Dr. Marion stepped around Dr. Lucius and moved through the hall again. “Anyway, all I asked him was why you were so opposed to me examining the control group. It would be an important step in my training here.”*

 *“Your training?” Dr. Lucius walked faster than before so he could get ahead of Dr. Marion again and then look back at her. “This is not some college experiment that you’ll be graded on later. You’ve been hired to complete the tasks that I have laid out for you. And I don’t need you to study the control subjects because theirs is an ordinary existence. I would think that a first year psychology student would be able to understand what is happening with them. The real meat is right here, in this institution. While you value your training with such high regard, I have to consider what might happen if you contaminate these subjects with your exposure to the control group. The slightest deviation from the course we have chosen to follow could bring this whole project to an abrupt halt.”*

 *“I understand. I disagree, but I will abide with your decision.”*

 *“Good. Now, who should we drop in on this morning?” The Doctor juggled the keys with one hand until he managed to grasp one particular key. As he looked at it through his half glasses he said, “Fourteen is due for a visit.”*

 *“Clayton? I saw him just two days ago.”*

 *“Yes, I know. I’m curious about something.” He stretched his arm with the key toward Dr. Marion. “Open him up.”*

**And the Angel Sang**

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 There’s a noise. It’s not an alarm clock. It’s a noise – the kind of noise a dream lands on in the morning at the end of sleep. The dream seems like it goes on for hours, and something happens that makes a noise in the dream and that’s where the dream ends – with that noise.

 I think it’s coming from inside my room. No – not the room. I open my eyes and I can see the plain white ceiling – ultra-flat white, ugly ceiling paint. But the ceiling doesn’t look familiar. Where am I? I’ve had these feeling before – waking up in a strange room, like Grandma’s house, and couldn’t remember where I was or why I was there. Yet I’d eventually remember going to sleep in that room. But this one – I feel like I shouldn’t be here. I don’t remember where I went to sleep, but I’m sure it wasn’t here.

 The room contains a single bed (on which I now lay) complete with pillow and blankets, a wooden chair with no arms, a small table, and an even smaller desk. There are no pictures on the wall (although I can see un-faded paint where some may have been), and there’s a single bulb screwed into a socket on the ceiling glowing as bright as forty watts can. I know its forty because it’s the only thing I can read in the room – the number forty surrounded by what I’m sure is the brand name. The paint on the walls is not as flat as the ceiling, but it’s just as drab. I don’t know how you can make white look drab, but the decorators of this room managed it.

 And there’s still that noise.

 A constant rush of air or water – that’s it, water – flows into my ears. There must be water nearby, like a lake, or a river, or the ocean. The ocean – I think I like the ocean. My grandma took me to the ocean once. I wanted to go swimming, but she told me the jellyfish would make me sick. When I took my shirt off, she made me put it back on. She said the sun would burn my skin and give me cancer. She didn’t say cancer, but I didn’t understand the word she used. Maybe I’m near an ocean. That would be nice.

 “Caleb?”

 Who is there? I don’t remember the door opening.

 “Caleb, are you awake?”

 Is she kidding? I’m lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, my eyes as wide as the ocean nearby. “Yes, I’m awake.”

 “How are you feeling? You haven’t eaten since the day before yesterday.”

 What was the day before yesterday? Sunday? No, it was Tuesday. I only remember because on Tuesday she made me eat, not her but another *she*. I don’t remember who the other one was, but she made me eat something I guess was supposed to be meatloaf. That woman said I hadn’t eaten in two days. And I know I ate on Sunday. I’ve always eaten on Sunday. Father used to carve the roast and lay it so carefully on a plate, and Mother would hand it down to each of us in turn – first my brother, then my two sisters, and finally me. The meat was probably as good as Father could buy, but I had to cover it with gravy and salt to make it edible. Sometimes Mother would make baked beans with a reddish brown sauce sweeter than honey, and I would dip the meat in those beans. The meatloaf I got Tuesday was almost as dry as the roast Father carved for each of us – only Tuesday there was no gravy, salt, not even a bottle of ketchup. “I’m not hungry.”

 “You have to eat. They’re going to bring by a plate of food in a little while. If you don’t eat I’ll have to have you fed another way.” She said something after that, but it didn’t make any sense. It was a word I thought sounded funny so I laughed. “What are laughing at?”

 “Nothing. I’m sorry. I’ll try to keep from it in the future.”

 “No. It’s okay to laugh. I just haven’t heard you laugh since I got here.”

 Where is here? All I can see is the ceiling. I haven’t even looked at the voice who knows my eating habits. I should look, but if I do I might give up something. She might make me eat, and I don’t want to eat – not yet, anyway. And if she has any of that awful tea, like the other woman, I’ll probably throw up. I used to like tea. But anymore they just as well give it to the rats – she can give it to the rats. God, the water sounds so inviting. Maybe – oh, I doubt if they will – I doubt if she will. “Can I have my dinner by the water?”

 “Water? What water?”

 Is she deaf? “The ocean. Can’t you hear it? It sounds like the waves just keep crashing on the shore.”

 “There’s no shore. There’s no water, either. Maybe I should call the doctor and have him check you out. Do you hear ringing in your ears?”

 If I heard ringing doesn’t she think I would have said I heard ringing? If I did I doubt it would be very noticeable above the sound of those never-ending waves. “Can’t you hear the waves?” As I look at her I realize she is beautiful. Oh, yeah. I saw her Sunday. Before I smelled the food I could sense that heavenly fragrance I smell now. It’s like fruit, and flowers, and something that stirs a part of me I barely understand. There’s an itch coming from my pants. That smell of hers made me feel that way Sunday. And Sunday she bent over me as I looked at those breasts of hers restrained by a white polyester blouse and just a touch of white undergarment peeking through, holding together two partially exposed mounds of pink flesh, probably four inches – no, six inches wide. She checked my temperature Sunday. Maybe she will today, too. “I’m hot.”

 “It’s only seventy-two in here. I’d open the window but it’s a little chilly outside.”

 “And the spray off the ocean might come in.”

 “Caleb, there is no ocean near here.”

 The rushing sound fades and the pitch falls off, too, like a distant siren moving away, and now I hear only four squeaky wheels in the hall rolling across the carpet past my door. The noise has stopped, and now it’s rolling away. But I know there must have been an ocean near here at one time. I couldn’t have mistaken that noise. The vacuum must have just masked the sound of the ocean. Although I don’t hear it anymore, either – the ocean, that is.

 “Can I have them bring you something, Caleb?”

 Bring me what? Is she still wearing the same thing she wore Sunday? She smells the same, not like the other one and her smell of cheap lilacs and hairspray. But I think she’s talking about food. They’re never happy until you eat – she’s never happy. It’s like if I don’t eat I must be sick. But if I wolf down my food and give a big belch afterwards they’ll say, “My! What a good appetite! You must be feeling better.” That’s what I’ll do. I’ll have her bring me a plate of food and I’ll devour it like a hungry orphan who hasn’t eaten in weeks. “I’ll have something to eat, as long as it’s not spinach or Brussels sprouts. And as long as it’s cooked.”

 “The kitchen made ham today – ham and boiled potatoes, with some string beans.” She’s leaning over me again. But I can’t see anything. She’s buttoned up too high today. “Does that sound okay?”

 “Sure, I guess.” It doesn’t really matter now. What’s the use of eating if I can’t catch a glimpse of her breasts again? Oh, but I have to remember the plan. That’s right. “That does sound pretty good. Can I eat by the window?”

 “I suppose. But the window should stay closed. Mrs. Dodd doesn’t want you to catch pneumonia. I’ll have to leave the curtain closed, too, because of the drafts.”

 What was happening to me? Drafts? Mrs. Dodd? I don’t know a Mrs. Dodd. “Is she a friend of my father’s?”

 “Who?”

 “Mrs. Dodd. I don’t remember the name.”

 “Your father? No, Mrs. Dodd is, well – don’t you remember your own –”

 “Nevermind. There’s no point in sitting by the window if I can’t see the water.”

 “Caleb, there is no water.”

 “I know. The window is closed.” I get it. They don’t want me to see the water – afraid I’ll stow away on a boat and they’ll never see me again. The food will convince them I’m okay. Mrs. Dodd will look at what I’ve eaten and probably let me sit on the beach tomorrow. Oh, who am I kidding? They don’t want me to see the water so the beach will be out of the question. Maybe I should just take a nap. Sure, I’ll take a nap right after I eat. Maybe all that’s wrong with me is lack of sleep. After all, I haven’t slept since Tuesday.

 The lady with the tea and cookies I don’t recognize. I should say I recognize her but I don’t know her. Oh, hell! I know her – I just don’t think I like her. She’s old and has a funny smell about her. It’s that old lady perfume. I hate the smell of a perfume that reminds me of walking into a funeral parlor – you know, that sickly sweet, flowery smell. She tried to be quiet coming through the door, but I could hear the knob twisting the way it does whenever she comes here – like she’s afraid to open the door but knows she has to do it. She sets a tray on the floor next to my bed and (surprise, surprise) places a cup of tea on it along with a plate of about four cookies. “Hello, Caleb.” Her voice makes my skin crawl. “How are you feeling?”

 “Fine. I feel fine.” I wonder if anyone really expects me to answer that question truthfully. *Well, I have a little pain in my legs because I slept on them wrong and my butt is tired of laying around so it hurts too and my neck feels like it’s been in a vice so it feels awful and, oh yeah – I want to throw up.* That would teach them.

 “I brought you something.”

 No, really? I thought she was leaving it for Santa Claus. “I already ate today.”

 “I know. But that was hours ago, and I thought you might like a treat.”

 She always calls this a treat – just like Grandma used to say when she gave us candy. We would come into the house after a walk on the beach, and Grandma would hold a dish with red and white peppermint swirls and ask, “Who wants a treat?” I hated those then, but I always ate one or two. What I wouldn’t give for one of those mints now. “Did you put milk in the tea?”

 “You know I always put milk in the tea.”

 “I don’t like milk. Can’t you just leave the milk out?”

 “The doctor says you need calcium.”

 “Can’t I have pills and leave out the milk?”

 “Just drink the tea. The milk will make it easier on your stomach.”

 Who is she kidding? The tea makes me want to throw up. I used to like it. I drank it all the time, every afternoon. Father said he got in the habit because his grandma came from England. So we all would join him and mother in the afternoon, drinking tea and eating cookies or cake. I used to look forward to it. Now, I can barely stand the thought. But wait – if I don’t they’ll think I’m still sick – she’ll think I’m still sick. I don’t care if it’s rat poison – I’ll drink all the tea and eat all the cookies. That’ll show her.

 “Caleb, the doctor doesn’t offer us much hope.”

 Good for him. “The doctor? You mean Gerry?”

 “The doctor’s name is Harlan – Harlan Benisch – not Gerry.”

 “I thought his name was Gerry.” Big surprise, I can’t remember his name. I don’t even know who this lady is, and she’s worried I forgot the doctor’s name. “Hope of what?”

 “Your recovery. There is no cure for –” the word that follows doesn’t make sense. Even if she said it again I doubt I’d remember it. “You could go on like this for some time.”

 Maybe, just maybe, if they would let me sit by the water and get some fresh air I would feel better. “Does that mean I still have to have milk in my tea?”

 I guess I shouldn’t say things like that. I don’t know why, but it makes her cry. She walks over to the curtain, but she’s not looking out the window. That’s kind of stupid – stand by the window and stare at the floor, when she could be looking at the water. “Oh, Caleb.”

 The door opens and the whole room changes. It’s her – white lace and heavenly fragrance. Looks like she wants me to drink something, too. She’s carrying a silver pitcher and a small glass. But when she sees the other one she stops. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to disturb the two of you.”

 “It’s okay,” the other replies. “I just brought him some tea.”

 “Yeah,” I say, “but it’s got milk in it. Do you want it?”

 “No!” The lady by the window says, like she’s mad. “I mean, if you really don’t want it I’ll just throw it out.”

Better to throw it out than throw it up. But I have to remember the eating thing. I can’t let her get another excuse to talk to Dr. Gerry about me. “It’s okay. I’ll finish it.”

The other woman – the pretty one – she’s still holding the pitcher, like she’s unsure what to do. “I just brought Caleb a fresh pitcher of water. I didn’t mean to cause a problem.”

“No, that’s fine,” tea-lady tells her. “I was just leaving anyway.” As she walks by she looks at me and asks, “Do you want the tea or not?”

“I’ll drink it.” What’s one more cup one way or another?

The pretty one must be intimidated by the old one. She sets the pitcher and glass on my tray and follows her out. But before she shuts the door she looks at me and smiles. “Caleb, if you need anything just call out. I’ll be in the hallway.”

The hallway? Why can’t she wait in here? I guess whatever I have must be contagious.

As I look toward the door, now shut, I catch a glimpse of myself on the silver pitcher. It’s like a mirror, but I don’t remember my chin being so wide and the top of my head being so small. And my nose – God, my nose looks like a highway disappearing into the distance. And there’s something on my head I’ve never seen before. What did they do to my hair? It used to be dark brown and so thick. Now there’s just a vague patch up there, and it’s almost all white. God damn it! That’s what happens when they put milk in the tea – when she puts milk in the tea. It turns everything white.

 “Boy.” His voice has a deep tone I remember quite well. “Boy, can you hear me?”

 “Father. Is that you?” I don’t know why, but the lights in my room are off and the curtain is blocking all light from the outside – not just some of the light, like earlier, but all of it. “I can’t see you.”

 “You don’t have to see me. You don’t see the stars in the daytime, but you know they’re still there.”

 Wow! That’s different. The last thing I remember Father saying to me was, “Get your head out of the way! I can’t see the game.” I was the one who always talked about looking at the stars through my telescope. The least he could do is open the curtain.

 “Son, you’re condition has you confused, doesn’t it?”

 “Not really. I’m not sure why they won’t let me out of this room, but I suppose it’s because I’m so tired all the time.” Why is he standing in the shadows? There is a streak of moonlight falling across his chest so all I can see plainly is a couple buttons on that old sweater he’s always worn.“Father, why is it so dark here?”

 “Are you afraid of the dark?”

 “Not since you gave me that flashlight. You remember, the one made from the stuff they make jets out of. That was a good flashlight. For the first two weeks after my birthday I read my comic books under the covers with that flashlight. I don’t think the batteries went dead for a year.”

 “You don’t have that flashlight, do you?”

 “No. No, they won’t let me have anything like that. But I don’t have any comics, either, so I guess it doesn’t matter.”

 “Are you afraid?”

 “Who’s Mrs. Dodd? They’re always talking about Mrs. Dodd and I don’t know who she is. Who is she, Father?”

 “Mrs. Dodd is my mother? You remember her, don’t you? We used to visit her on weekends when I worked in Boston.”

 Of course, I remember her. Why would he ask a question like that? I just didn’t think her name was Mrs. Dodd. We called her ‘Grandma’. “Did grandma live by the ocean?”

 “Yes. That’s very good. You’re doing quite nicely.”

 “I told them I heard water, but they wouldn’t let me eat by the window.” I have to rise in my bed to get closer to Father since he won’t come closer to me. “That lady, the one who brings me food and washes me – she smells so good, but I don’t think she’s knows I can smell her.”

 “Did you think she was Mrs. Dodd?”

 “No. No, she talks about Mrs. Dodd. I thought Mrs. Dodd was the lady who doesn’t smell so nice – the one who wears too much perfume. But she’s not Grandma.”

 “Your world has changed, son. Things are not always as they seem. You can’t rely on things being equal like they were when you were a boy in Massachusetts. Every state has a Utica, every town has a Main Street, and Columbia means so many things to so many people. A name is only your name when you own it – and you can never own it in this life.”

 This is not how I remember Father talking. Once I asked him what happens to people when they die, and he told me they became worm food. Now he sounds like my high school Latin teacher – the one who dreamed of teaching college philosophy, but never left our town. “Father, am I okay.”

 “No. No, you’re not. You’re breaking down.”

 “What, like a car?”

 “Sort of. But the car can usually be fixed. What’s happening to you can’t be fixed. It’s like when the motor goes bad in an old car. Oh, it may run a while, but it’s only a matter of time before the car has to be junked. But I’ve come here to help you get through it.”

 “But I ate. I ate everything they brought me yesterday – everything she brought me – even the tea.”

 “It doesn’t matter. They know you really weren’t hungry – you just acted that way to make it look like you’re doing better. If you eat that much again she is going to bring another plate of food. And if you finish that plate she’ll bring you another, and another – until you finally turn one down and they can say, ‘See. He really isn’t well. If he was okay he would have eaten just part of his food – the part he really wanted – and left the rest. And we know he isn’t really hungry.’ It’s like rat poison. The poison doesn’t really kill the rats. It makes them eat and drink until they stuff themselves so full they die.”

 “Father, I am afraid.” God knows I really am. But he won’t come any closer to me. “I’m so afraid.”

 “Are you afraid of the dark?”

 “No. No, I’m afraid of what will happen if I lose the light. Can’t you open the curtain to let some light in?”

 “I can’t. Once the curtain is closed, there is no opening it again.”

 This can’t be my father. He never finished a crossword puzzle. Now he’s talking in riddles. They closed the curtain Tuesday and opened them again this morning. Or was it Wednesday? I ate Tuesday, and I know the curtain was open. So they’ve obviously opened and closed the curtains before – she opened and closed them. “Father, please open the curtain.” He’s not answering me. “Father? Father?” I can’t take this anymore. Someone has to help me. “Help!” I know I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone has to be out there. They have to hear me.

 “Caleb,” her voice is almost a whisper. I didn’t hear the door open, nor did I see the light come in from the hall. “Why did you cry?”

 “I’m afraid.”

 “Why are you afraid?”

 “The curtain is closed. The curtain – it’s closed. And it’s so dark in here.”

The piece of moonlight that before laid on Father’s chest floats across her face as she approaches. “Caleb, the curtain is always closed. It’s just that it’s night. There’s no light outside except a few moonbeams.”

 “Can I see them?”

 “No. The night air is bad for you.”

 “But I ate today.”

 “I know. Maybe if you eat tomorrow I can open the curtain and you can watch the seagulls.”

 I knew it. The gulls must be flocking by the ocean. That’s what all that noise was this morning. Why didn’t they tell me – why didn’t she tell me? “Tell the other lady I don’t want milk in my tea. Okay?”

 “You don’t like milk in your tea?”

 “No. And she keeps putting it in there. I hate it. It makes the tea taste funny.”

 “Well, by all means you don’t have to have milk in your tea. I’ll tell Mrs. Dodd in the morning.”

“Can I tell you a secret?” She’s coming closer to me and, oh God! I can see her breasts. The moon just danced across her chest, and she still smells like Heaven. “I know who Mrs. Dodd is.”

 “I should hope you do. But that’s a good sign.”

 “She’s my grandma.”

 Her eyes have fallen. She won’t look at me. “Oh. I see.” She cups her hand on my face and combines a gentle patting motion with a soft stroke up and down. “Poor Caleb. You won’t understand the things that are happening to you. No one knows why you’re so sick this early in the disease, but no one really cares either – not even your w-, I mean, Mrs. Dodd. They seem to think the suffering is natural.”

 Suffering? Who’s suffering? So I threw up a couple times. Big deal! I’ve done that before. My brother and I got a box of Camels one time – no filters. Anyway, we walked over to the pond and each lit one. Man, were we cool. I finished mine in about five minutes and Denny finished his in about seven minutes. So we lit another. By the time I was halfway through the second one I felt this churning in my stomach. I took the last remnant of my butt and tossed it on the ground, only my own lunch may have beaten it to the dirt. Denny never batted an eye. “I should have warned you,” he said. “The same thing happened to me when I first tried ‘em.”

 That smell is back – you know, the smell of old ladies playing cards, culminating with the odor of burnt toast and cereal. It wouldn’t be so awful if it weren’t for that smell of funeral flowers at a wake. I think I’d rather smoke a pack of Camels than smell that smell. The breakfast tray has got a few things on it I used to eat – oatmeal, toast, and pat of butter and one of those plastic tubs of marmalade, the kind the comes with a plate of restaurant toast. What did she do? Raid the condiment bar at the diner?

 “There you are, honey.” God! I hate it when she calls me that. She lays the tray on my lap and sits on the side of the bed. “It’s not a lot, but that ought to keep you from starving.”

 “I ate Tuesday.”

 “Yes, dear. But this is Friday. The nurse said you even ate yesterday – said you had a plateful of ham and potatoes.”

 “The ham wasn’t very good. They left the fat on it so I had to trim it off myself. But then I was afraid to leave anything, so I ate it once I had finished the ham.”

 “Well, you won’t have to do that this morning. The oatmeal is sweet and the toast is just right – exactly the way you like it.”

 I am not a fool. She thinks she can put one over on me, but I’m not playing this game with her this morning. “You know, you’re not my grandma.”

 “I should hope not, Caleb. Your grandmother has been dead for forty years.”

 “I know.” You have to humor these people. Let her talk, I figured. “And that’s not all I figured out.” She really would think twice before she tried to pull one over on me again. “What will you do if I eat all that oatmeal and every slice of bread?”

 “What do you want me to do?”

 “You’ll bring me another one – another plate, that is.”

 “If you want one.”

If I want one, she says. How quaint! “And tea and cookies? How many plates of those will you bring me before I’m stuffed full of them?”

“Caleb, you sound angry. I know you don’t like the milk in your tea, but I was just trying to help you – your stomach.”

I motion to her to come a little closer so I don’t have to shout my next bit of knowledge. “I know what you’re up to. You understand?”

She lays her hand on her chest. “I don’t, uh, know what –”

“The food, the way you’ll keep it coming.” Oh, I had her now. “Just like the tea you keep giving me. Every time I finish a cup, you pour me more. Well, I know what you’re up to – and you’ll never get away with it.” I’m winking at her.

So far she can only stare at me with this look like I’m about to run her down at a deer crossing. This is really sweet. Finally, I think she’s going to speak. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean.”

“The more I take, the more you’re going to give me. Isn’t that right? Just like the rats.”

She stands and now has one hand over her mouth. Maybe she’s going to throw up. “You don’t know anything. How could you know anything?”

“He told me.”

“Who?”

“You know. I’ll just leave it at that because you’ll try to tell me he’s dead, too.”

She has started pacing and – Good Lord! Just how big are those clodhoppers she’s wearing? She sounds like a sentry walking guard duty at the tower. Ernie Lewis wore some boots that made him look like frigging Frankenstein and sounded like a lumberjack chopping down a redwood when he walked. She sounds like Ernie Lewis. “Caleb, you have to understand what I am going through.”

Sure – what she’s going through. I’ll bet this is going to be better than the time she told me raw vegetables were actually good for me – not just carrots and celery, but corn, peas, and green beans. It’s because of the vitamins.

“Caleb, you could go on forever like this. The doctor says in a few months you won’t be able to take care of yourself. You’ll have to wear a diaper, someone will have to feed you, and this will all have to be done at a hospital.” If she could just pace her words with her footsteps she’d sound like a ballad singer with her own drumbeat. “We – can’t – afford – that.”

“So you thought you’d just stuff me full of the crap until I gave up. No matter whether I would suffer or not. Just keep it coming, keep it coming.”

“Oh, God, Caleb!” she puts her hands over her eyes. “You make it sound so awful.” She stops and seems to peek at me through one of her hands. “Did you tell anyone anything?”

They thought they had me – she thought she had me. But they should have let me open the curtain. “I told her.”

“Her? The nurse? Miss Craigmiles? What did you tell her?”

I lean forward a bit more. “I told her I knew about Mrs. Dodd. She’s going to take care of the tea and what makes it taste funny.”

The scream she is letting loose is loud enough to wake Father, I’m sure. Where does she think she’s going? That window is closed. I know you can’t tell through the closed curtain. Now you’ve done it. You broke the window. Stop screaming it’s only a window. God, is she going to be surprised when she lands. There’s no water out there.

 *With only a trifle of hesitation, Dr. Marion took the key from Dr. Lucius and seemed to help it follow a path toward a door several meters from where they stood. The lock on the gray steel door made a clacking sound as she twisted the key, and a green light on the door jam signaled the lock was opened correctly, not picked with an unauthorized device. Only a slight creaking sound accompanied the opening of the door, but a rush of air coming out gave Dr. Marion a slight chill.*

 *The room inside contained a single bed complete with a pillow and blankets, a wooden chair with no arms, a small table, and an even smaller desk, and the figure of twelve year old Clayton Perry folded in the lotus position in the corner of the room staring at the plate of food in front of him, still untouched. Clayton’s body showed some signs of undernourishment being lean, but no indications of malnutrition. His hair was shaved around the sides and the back, and the top had grown to perhaps a quarter of an inch. His scalp showed signs of scratches caused by irritation, some so bad that scabs had developed. Dark circles marked the underneath sides of both eyes, which remained fixed and dilated. Clayton’s gauze shirt and pants looked fairly clean but exhibited some signs of stains, some caused by blood but most by food.*

 *I knew this boy. I didn’t know how or when we had come into contact… but I knew this boy. His emaciated face and malnourished body could not hide the signature of his identity… Yet, I could not bring it into full view… I only knew he lived in a part of my memory.*

 *“Good morning,” Dr. Lucius said. Dr. Marion remained standing by the door while Lucius set his coffee on the table, pulled the chair to the center of the room, and sat. He laid his notebook on his lap while he grabbed one more quick sip of coffee. “How are you this morning?”*

 *Clayton’s eyes remained affixed on the floor.*

 *“You’re very quiet today. Did you sleep okay?”*

 *Clayton raised his shoulders a couple inches for a moment. “I guess.”*

 *“When I talked to you last week you said you were having some strange dreams.”*

 *“So?”*

 *“So, are you still having them?”*

 *“They’re just dreams.”*

 *Why did I imagine he would answer that way?*

 *“Dr. Ray,” Lucius said as he looked toward me, “you may do your ordinary rounds if you like.”*

 *No. “I’d like to stay.”*

 *I seemed to have stunned Dr. Lucius. It felt longer, but he remained mute for about ten seconds. “Very well. Doctor Marion,” strong emphasis on doctor, “why don’t you take Dr. Ray’s rounds. He has a relatively light load that I doubt even you could disrupt.”*

 *Dr. Marion literally bit her lip before she said, “Yes, Doctor,” same emphasis in kind. She left the room, storming out as if sent to her room without supper.*

 *Amused by the young lady’s tantrum, Dr. Lucius turned to me and winked. “I hope your interest was worth her little escapade. She’s a promising student.”*

 *“I’m sorry if I caused a problem. I simply wanted to talk to young Clayton here.”*

 *“Oh, it’s all right. She needs to little dose of reality. Everyone wants to be Sigmund Freud, but they don’t want to do the reading and studying that goes with it.” The Doctor approached Clayton and took his hand. “I dare say, this young lad reads a lot… Don’t you, Clayton?”*

 *Clayton blinked his eyes about thirty times and opened them in my direction. “Do I know you?” he asked, almost simultaneous to the thought entering my head.*

 *“I don’t know how,” I replied. “I doubt we travel in the same circles. Do you know anyone who went to SIU School of Medicine?”*

 *“Is that supposed to be funny?”*

 *“Dr. Ray,” Lucius said, “Clayton is very attuned to sarcasm.”*

 *“It wasn’t meant to be.” I knelt a bit and looked directly in Clayton’s eyes. “Clayton knows that we have some sort of connection… Don’t you, Clayton?”*

 *“You’ve had the dreams, too,” Clayton replied. “Haven’t you?”*

 *“What dreams are those?”*

 *“You know… The man in the dark coat… staring at us… watching us… interfering with our lives… You know.”*

 *I did know. How could he know?*

 *For a moment I had forgotten I was in a dream myself. Of course Clayton knew what lay in my mind. Clayton was nothing more than a figment of my own ethereal construct, interacting with me as if both of us were wide awake… But this seemed wrong too.*

 *“You’re searching for the truth right now,” Clayton continued, “aren’t you?”*

 *“Are you asking or telling?”*

 *Dr. Lucius held a knitted brow. “What are you two talking about?”*

 *“We can’t stop asking questions,” Clayton said, “can we?”*

 *“Why do you end each sentence as an interrogative?” I asked.*

 *Clayton smiled. “Why do you?”*

 *The three of us stopped talking for fear we would continue this pointless series of questions. I wanted answers, not more questions. If I dared postulate a thought it would do nothing to propel the conversation. And yet, another question would raise even more questions.*

 *One more… “Who are you?” I asked and held my hand up toward Dr. Lucius as if to silence him.*

 *“Don’t you know?”*

 *“Stop this! No more questions! This is not an inquisition!”*

**Court of Characters**

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 “Where am I?”

 A swirling notion of a combination of vertigo and outright uncertainty struck me so intently as to all but paralyze me in my chair, a heavy, wooden article devoid of arms and padded only on the seat with crushed velvet and hard batting.

 “Who am I?”

 I could not grasp a name, an identity, or even a mother or father to have given me either. I seemed to know the clothes I wore; a shirt with celluloid collar and tie, a silken vest in charcoal gray, a lighter gray woolen coat shorter in front than in back, and trousers of black wool without the slightest piece of lint or thread.

 A man in a powdered wig leaned over to me and nudged my shoulder with his. “You must keep silent until it is your time to speak.”

 I wanted to speak aloud, but I took this admonishment to heart. Instead I almost whispered my thoughts, “My time to speak about what?”

 “All rise!” another man in a similar powdered wig called out. To wit, everyone sans myself stood in some sort of gesture of respect. My companion touched my arm and nodded to me as if I should know what it is he expected me to do.

 I did perceive his meaning, albeit I know not why. So quickly I nearly toppled my chair, I rose being later than the rest, and I watched as the man who summoned our stance began to read from a scroll. “Oyez! Oyez! Oyez! This court is now in session. The Honorable Lord Beckett presiding. Draw near and be heard… those who have not been heard… before.”

 An aged man donned in black robe with gold bans on the sleeves and a purple sash around his neck, and also covered in a powdered wig, much higher and longer than the other men in the court. As he seated himself in his chair, similar to my own only in style but with red padded back and arms, I could hear the snaps of his bones from those in his knee to his back and shoulders… and even several clicks emanating from his fingers. He reached for a gavel and, as feeble as he appeared, struck the wooden block three times and produced a thunderous pounding not only echoing in the courtroom… but also in my head.

 “Be seated!” His voice took a tone of a bass string coaxed by a smooth bow with only slight tremolo quavers pointing to his age. “This court is now come to order. I warn you I will not abide any undue outbursts or improper rants. This is a serious matter before us, and I will not let irrelevant ramblings taint an otherwise rational presentation of the facts.” He coughed as if either the strength of his voice or the drama of his words had taken a toll. “Mr. Prosecutor, I realize this is not a criminal matter as of yet, but are you ready to proceed?”

 A man at a table to the other side of the court from my companion and I, in the same uniform as all the other major players, stood and spoke, “I am, My Lord. I ask only to be given latitude in cross examining this witness due to the oddities which you yourself have indicated, My Lord.”

 “So be it. However, I must warn you that I will not tolerate inconsistencies from you anymore than I will from the witness.”

 “Understood, My Lord.” The Prosecutor seated himself.

 “Is defense counsel ready?”

 The man next to me rose and answered, “Yes, My Lord. But might I suggest we have not yet established there is a matter for my client to be defended against as of yet, My Lord.”

 “How would you suggest we refer to you in this matter?”

 “I only wish that to be pointed out, My Lord. As the ‘defendant’ has no name per se, I know of no other way to address him.”

 “So I take it this one point of fact, that he is named,” the Judge looked at a paper on his desk, “Philip Winthrop is a point of contention.”

 “Yes, My Lord.”

 “Proceed.”

 My “friend” leaned in a bit and turned his head as if to suggest he needed to hear better with the leading ear. “Excuse me, My Lord?”

 “I want you to proceed.”

 “But the prosecution has not made its case yet, My Lord.”

 The Judge leaned his head back, gazed at the ceiling, and puff a blast of air. “Counselor, as you have already pointed out, this is not a criminal matter… yet. I want you to present the evidence you have as to what your client did and why he did it. There are many questions unclear to this court needing answered.”

 “This is highly irregular, My Lord. All due respect, it appears as if the court is suggesting we must prove my client’s innocence. Is it not the court’s job to prove his guilt, My Lord?”

 “Do you remember where you, Counselor? This is a Literary Court. The deeds of your client are a matter of record. I merely want an explanation as to your client’s involvement in the destruction of Usher Mansion and the deaths of the Usher family.”

 “In that case, My Lord, I will present my first objection in the form of argument against this court’s jurisdiction in the whole matter. Not once in the entire story is it clear where the Usher Mansion is located or whether the Usher family falls into the jurisdiction of a British court of law.”

 “Your honor,” the Prosecutor said as he jumped, nearly sprang to his feet, “I fail to see that as relevant since while it does not identify a location it also does not indicate the Usher Mansion and its inhabitants are not subjects of Great Britain.”

 My own lawyer pasted on a strange smile that almost took on the shape of a frown. “The author,” he looked at his notepad, “Edgar Allan Poe, was an American citizen, thereby rendering the weight of evidence on the side that the Ushers and their mansion were not British subjects.”

 “Mr. Poe does, in fact, refer to the dwelling as a castle in the story, My Lord. There are very few, if any castles in America.”

 “There is, Mr. Prosecutor, only one reference to the house as a castle while there are seven references to it as a mansion… a very common reference in America.”

 The Judge pounded his gavel. “Counselor, you will address me instead of the Prosecutor.”

 “I apologize, My Lord.”

 “However, your point is well made. While it is unclear as to the exact location, your case that it could be an American household is sound.”

 “Thank you, My Lord.”

 “Don’t thank me yet. Because this is a Literary Court the fact that I am a British judge is irrelevant. This court has often, and nearly as often with me at the bench, examined and judged literary works from Australia, Canada, and North America because of the nature of the structure in play. Can you tell me, Counselor, in what language is the story about the Ushers written?”

 My lawyer sighed deeply. “English, My Lord.”

 “And while there are a great number of variant syntaxes between our two bodies, the structure and basic rules of English apply. So by virtue of the language and grammatical structure I am granted the jurisdiction.” He pounded his gavel once again as if to signal the end of a round of battle.

 “Very well, My Lord.” My attorney, as I had come to know, glanced over at me… and even though his glance took only a second, I read volumes in his eyes. They showed the sense of seeing a fish on land, watching the sun set in the east, and not knowing what path to take home. Apparently whatever plans he devised felt the crush of the Judge’s edict. Now uncertainty bathed his senses where only moments before he thought he had some answers. “Could I, My Lord, simply have my client tell his story?”

 “I do not need a recitation of the facts of this case. What this court is more interested in is his direct knowledge of how young Madeline came to her demise as well as her brother Roderick, what exactly he was doing there, and how the Usher Mansion or Castle fell to its destruction.”

 “Then I submit, My Lord, could not the Prosecutor ask those questions?”

 “I believe I just asked them.” The Judge removed his powdered wig long enough to wipe the sweat from his very bald crown and replace it again. “Mr. Winthrop…”

 “Objection, My Lord,” my attorney said. “We have established my client has no name.”

 “Very well. Would your client please take a seat in the witness box?”

 Not sure I could even walk, I gathered my strength and my wits and took a few steps forward to the chair surrounded by a wooden rail and vertical slats. The bailiff opened a gate and indicated I should stand inside the box. He produced a copy of a book, I thought to be a Bible… but when his thumb moved away from the center enough it revealed the words “The Collected Works of William Shakespeare.” The gray-blue cover showed signs of extreme wear and the edges of the paper had yellowed almost to a light brown. And even with all the apparent wear it looked as though the book had never been thumbed through or even opened. “Do you swear before this court to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you the prophets and disciples of the Bard.”

 “Yes,” I said, somewhat confused. “I suppose I do.”

 “You suppose?” the Judge asked.

 “I do,” I replied more concisely.

 “Be seated.”

 “My Lord,” my attorney spoke as if he had been graced with an idea, “perhaps you should ask my client the questions you want answered. In that way we might move this case along, per your desires, of course, My Lord.”

 “That,” the Judge held a pause, “would be highly irregular.”

 “What is regular in a Court of Characters, My Lord?”

 In what seemed minutes but in all likelihood only took seconds, the Judge held his lips tight shut while he ran his tongue over his teeth and stared at me. And finally, “Very well. If there are no objections from the Prosecutor?”

 The other barrister rose while swinging his head back and forth. “No objections, My Lord.”

 The Judge picked up a pile of papers and tapped them on the bench to straighten and even their layout. As he set them down he began, “Would the witness, in his own words, tell me why you even visited Usher Manor?”

 “My Lord, if I may,” I started but found the Judge quickly interrupting.

 “Please, for the duration of your testimony you may dispense with the formalities to this court unless you wish to address me directly or have a question or comment that is not considered testimony.”

 “Well, sir, I was friends with Roderick Usher since I was a boy… close friends. While I had on occasion visited him without reason, on this particular day I had been spurred on by a letter he wrote to me. He seemed agitated, confused, and spoke of a medical condition I was not aware of prior to my visit.”

 “Are you a medical doctor?” the Judge asked.

 “No, My Lord… I mean, no.”

 “What was the nature of this malady?”

 “In short, heightened senses.”

 “Which senses?”

 “All of them. Hearing, sensitivity to light, taste, touch, olfactory. Imagine you are in a room where instruments are trumpeting loudly, a sunlight is directed into your eye, you are forced to eat the most burning spice, your clothes are made from barbed wire, and the odors of skunks and feces are a preponderance. Without modifying his existence, this would have been how Roderick Usher would have lived.”

 The Judge pushed himself back from the bench. “That would be hell.”

 “Indeed, My Lord. Indeed.”

 “And your fiancée, his sister… she was plagued with this disease as well?”

 “I’m sorry, My Lord. Madeline Usher was not my fiancée. I think this relates to the error you have about my name being Philip Winthrop. I knew Madeline… I liked her very much… and under different circumstances or time, I might have taken her as my bride. But that was not to be in any case. After my arrival I saw her but once, and shortly after she had succumbed to the disease… or so I believed.”

 “Explain.”

 “I don’t know if I imagined this, dreamed this, or it really happened… but I saw her again, directly before the falling of the mansion. Her clothes were drenched in blood, her extremities appeared as if she had fought with someone… perhaps Roderick.”

 “As far as you know, she was alive when you saw her?”

 “Yes. But it was almost as if she was resurrected… not simply alive… and resurrected from a very chaotic state.”

 “So you do not know it this was real or if it was an illusion?”

 “No, My Lord.”

 The Prosecutor rose and cocked his head to one side, the eyebrow on the lower side being brought down closer to the eye. “Objection, My Lord. He is using a dream or an illusion as testimony. How can we determine anything from this if the witness himself cannot attest to its veracity?”

 A murmur drifted throughout the gallery and the Judge pounded his gavel. “Order!” As he set his gavel down he seemed to twist his head in an effort to pop some bones in his neck… with some success, I might add. “The witness’s intent is clear and unvarnished. He even admits to his own uncertainty with the vision. The court will give this testimony as much weight as the witness gives it, but we shall not dispense with it by striking it from the record. Overruled.”

 Not so wounded but still lightly disappointed, the Prosecutor sat.

 The Judge pushed himself away from the bench, not unlike a man pushing himself away from a plate of food he could no longer consume. Again he looked to me as he spoke. “The falling of the mansion… what caused this?”

 “This is the part of the tale, while I can tell you what I saw, I cannot attest to how it came to be. From the moment I set foot on the grounds, even at a distance, the massive hulk of the mansion displayed a crack in the façade. The stones looked at if the slightest trickling of water could dissolve them. And I don’t think I found one piece of lumber or beam that carried the brown wooden color even hewn wood retains… instead it was all gray… rotted.”

 “Why then did your friend and his sister stay within those walls… if it was that obvious the house would fall?”

 I could but shake my head. “My Lord, this is what I asked myself from the first contact on this visit. Yet, their reasons, at least Roderick’s, must have been almost philosophical… if not spiritual.”

 The Judge said nothing but gazed at me quizzically.

 “I believed their destinies were tied to the house… or the house was tied to them… You said yourself, My Lord… the malady they suffered was hell. I think this was their Hell. I don’t know if they were suffering the sins of their own or the sins of some past ancestry. But when I saw or dream Madeline’s resurrection I saw anger in her eyes toward Roderick… This was a sin committed by one on the other… or perhaps both.”

 “Was not Madeline buried prematurely due to a catatonic state that has been known to plague members of her family?”

 “That is a possibility, but the evidence I think you are referencing is another account. I only know what I saw and experienced on that fateful visit.”

 “By this account,” the Judge spoke as if addressing the rest of the court, “the conditions and circumstances of the Usher demise existed well before the witness made an appearance at the mansion.” He looked directly at the Prosecutor. “Do you not agree, Mr. Prosecutor?”

 The Prosecutor stood. “Yes, My Lord. But the questions of the other character… this,” he looked at his notepad, “Philip Winthrop, may have a bearing on the case.”

 “The witness has clearly stated he is not Philip Winthrop. How can we hold this character responsible when he not the same man? And who is to say Philip Winthrop is responsible in his own idiom.”

 “Idiom, My Lord?”

 “Is Philip Winthrop a character in the same art form?”

 From the back of the court and tremored, midrange, scratchy voice called attention to a short, pale man with dark, oily hair, brooding eyes, and moustache covering his upper lip as he spoke. “May I address the court, My Lord?”

 “Who are you?”

 “My Lord, I am Edgar Allen Poe, the author of the work of art on trial here today.”

 “This is highly irregular, Mr. Poe. Authors are rarely, if ever allowed to testify in a Court of Characters.”

 “And why is that, My Lord?”

 “Because the author sets the stage and directs the action and conflict. In short, the author’s testimony is already given. It would be redundant to allow you to testify.” The Judge brushed a couple fingers over a small gold cross on his lapel as he looked up. “It would be like God testifying as to why the Holocaust took place.”

 “I do not wish to testify. You have, in fact, named why I must address the court.”

 “Please, proceed.”

 “You said the author sets the stage and directs the action and conflict. Yet, you want to introduce evidence of a character named Philip Winthrop who was the fiancée of Madeline Usher. I, as Edgar Allen Poe, never wrote such a story.”

 “He’s right, My Lord,” another voice came from the other side of the courtroom. “Point of fact, I wrote it.”

 “And who,” the Judge said as he strained his eyes through a pair of spectacles he put on moments before, “are you?”

 “My name is Richard Matheson.” A tall man with gray medium length hair stood as he spoke. “I wrote the version of the House of Usher you are referring to when you speak of Philip Winthrop.”

 “You wrote another version? Why would you write another short story based on Mr. Poe’s story?”

 “It was not a short story. I wrote a screenplay that was adapted into a film. But on other occasions I have written my own short stories and novels as well. To be blunt, I agree with Mr. Poe even though I made the changes in questions to the script.”

 “Who solicited this ‘screenplay,’ and why did you find it necessary to change key elements of the story?”

 “I was asked to do so by the producer and director, Roger Corman.”

 Mr. Poe spoke again. “And, My Lord, this is not the first time someone has taken liberties with my story. Two other ‘films’ were made prior to this one. Yet, this is the one which made the most changes to my story, although I object to anyone who changes my work.”

 The Prosecutor rose and said, “My Lord, may we approach the bench?”

 The Judge, breathing deeply and shaking his head, motioned for both the Prosecutor and my own attorney to come forward. I remained in the witness box, well within earshot of their conversation transpiring once both stood at the edge of the bench.

 “What is it, Mr. Prosecutor?” the Judge asked.

 “More and more we are finding these character studies more difficult as these so called films disregard the authors intent and make up a varied if not completely different story.”

 “Mr. Prosecutor, if you remember I presided over the case of Scarlett O’Hara making her explain her actions with Rhett Butler and Ashley Wilkes. I do remember there was testimony about slight differences in the overarching story… but the plot and the character motivation was spot on in both venues.”

 “I know, My Lord. But there were even then many other examples of stories deviating from the original novel or short story… The only saving grace was that many of the classics were held more sacred, and in some cases the original authors were consulted. This is no longer the case. This Roger Corman is perhaps the worst perpetrator of the mid Twentieth Century. The film *The Pit and Pendulum* is nowhere near the story Mr. Poe wrote. And he even made a film based on Mr. Poe’s poem ‘The Raven.’ All of them written by this man Matheson who now claims he agrees this is a travesty.”

 “A poem?”

 “A poem, My Lord? Others have complained. Stephen King, Michael Crichton, Ray Bradbury, and many others. Michael Crichton took matters in his own hands by making one of his own films.”

 My attorney touched the Judges hand. “If I may, My Lord, New York has done exceptional work on Broadway and they do it all while keeping the playwright’s work sacred. Often they don’t change even a word.”

 The Judge seemed motivated by my attorney’s words. “Why can’t the powers that be in Hollywood and Europe do the same thing?”

 “My Lord,” the Prosecutor replied, “the European companies, save London, are often making films that are originals. But when they are not, the author may as well not even exist. As far as London and Hollywood go, they will give credit to the author in name only, but the stories are seen through the eyes of the director and sometimes the producer. They are not interested in changing. Sometimes the author will demand they give credit to another name the author has taken as a pseudonym or penname.”

 “So let me get this straight… A man like Mr. Edgar Allen Poe can pour his heart and soul into a story, give the characters life, love, and motivation, and fight to have these works published; receive either high praise or contention from critics, but create themes that make human society converse and debate over them; and become household words in this arduous process. And in a flash, a ‘film’ producer or director can cast aside all that and imbue his or her own conscience and ideas to present the story?”

 “Yes, My Lord.”

 “Exactly, My Lord.”

 The Judge sucked on his teeth again and kept shaking his head. “Step back.”

 As my attorney and the Prosecutor moved to their seats the Judge also directed me to sit at my table. His head appeared to be broken as it swayed back and forth. Soon he switched from sucking his teeth to biting the inside of his upper lip.

 A change in the direction of his head bobbing, from side to side to up and down, indicated an idea… although he did not seem pleased. “It is clear to me this tale of the House of Usher is more indicative not only of the Usher family, but of art itself. I do not preside over the painters, the sculptors, or the poets. But I have presided over screenplays and plays. The attorney for the defense is correct when he says playwrights are given complete charge of their works. I have feared these differences would become an issue in the film industry.

 “The crack in the Usher House is not unlike the crack in Hollywood’s art medium. You cannot take the art of one man or woman and ignore their intent. It would be no different than Picasso painting his own rendition of Mona Lisa… or taking the statue of David and having Rachel Whiteread produce her own postmodern version. Artists often copy the works of the masters… but it is to compliment and learn… not to disgrace with their own hubris.

 “The crack is indicative that any medium ignoring the intent of another artist is doomed… much like the Ushers. I cannot force them to accept an author’s rendition of a theme, a character, or other motivation… I only warn… They are a part of the art house… and a house divided against itself cannot stand.”

 The Judge looked at me. “Please rise.”

 I stood, brushed my coat and made sure the buttons were intact, and held my hands at my side.

 “I find you are not responsible for the events that led to the destruction of the Ushers and their dwelling. And further, if anyone confuses you with Mr. Winthrop from Mr. Matheson’s ‘version’ of the story, they will answer to this court… I cannot stop the corrupting of an art form. But, by God, and can set those straight who don’t see it… This Court of Characters is adjourned.”

 *Clayton unwrapped his legs and placed them on the floor, standing much taller than I imagined his emaciated body could stand. He raised his left pajama leg above the knee to reveal a surgical scar the ran from about two inches above the kneecap down about seven inches. Fresh, red, but devoid of staples, stitches, or bandages, it appeared to be healing but blotches of red surrounded it and the whole center section of his leg swelled twice that of its right counterpart. “I am you.”*

 *“No.” I reached down to my own pant leg and slipped it above my knee only to see the duplicate image on my own leg. I didn’t really need to see it. I knew it like the tiniest imperfect that graced the backside of my hand. I think I raised my pant leg in hopes he was wrong.*

 *Both of us, Clayton and I, looked at Dr. Lucius whose countenance transformed into a smiling angel… but not an angel of God. His coat turned black, his eyes became deep scarlet, and his skin became a deep shade of reddish brown. As I looked to the dark figure, in my peripheral vision I noticed Clayton disappeared. The room remodeled itself into my own hospital room, and my lab coat became a gown. The pain in my leg returned as I continued to stand before the man who pursued me through my nightmares.*

 *“You know why I’m here,” the man said, “don’t you?” A chuckle at his mocking interrogative form did not make me feel any easier.*

 *“What do you want?”*

 *“I want you to know how fortunate you are. You were mine. I came for you.”*

 *“What do you want from me?”*

 *“What I want from everyone… Your life.”*

 *“I’m not ready.”*

 *“No one ever is. The young are shocked by me, the middle aged are unprepared, and the old fear me every morning.”*

 *“I’m not afraid of you.” I really was, but I didn’t want to admit it.*

 *“Sure you are. I came hoping to steal you away… But forces greater than you or I have plans for you. So I did for you what I don’t do for anyone. I wanted you to know how close you really came. Your family knew. Your closest friends knew. Your wife looked in your eyes and wondered if she would ever see you again… alive… Even your doctor thought the possibility existed… But not you.”*

 *“What now?”*

 *“I guess you’ll just have to wait and see. Whatever Fate has planned for you, it doesn’t involve me… at least not yet.”*

 *I awoke in hospital bed, drench in sweat, nearly choking on the lack of saliva in my mouth and throat. The sound of coughing came from the other bed in the room, no longing being graced by the meth head but now accompanied by a man in respiratory distress.*

 *A nurse burst through the door and rushed past my bed to my roommate. “Are you okay, Mr. Siguiente?” There was no reply. Just coughing. “Here’s your inhaler… That’s it. Relax…”*

 *Taking the remote device that delivered morphine to me and pressing it, I felt a slight wave of relaxation flow over me. I closed my eyes and shuffled it in my pillow to find the right place. For the first time in the particular stay, my mind drifted to more pleasant thoughts. Nothing too outrageous… Just thoughts of feeling sunshine, a cool breeze, and maybe a small bowl of ice cream… In light of where I had been, it seemed nonsensical.*

 *As the nurse walked by my bed she saw me likely not sleeping even though my eyes were closed. Must have been the way I breathed. “Are you okay? Do you need anything?”*

 *“Is he okay?”*

 *“Mr. Siguiente? He’ll be all right. Just had an episode… Do you need anything?”*

 *“I’m good.”*

 *“Have a good night.”*

 *She pulled the door shut on her way out.*

 *I opened my eyes, and for a moment I again felt fear. The dark figure of the man pursuing me stood at the center of the room. I started to speak but he stopped me with the silence gesture of placing his index finger over his mouth… He pointed to Mr. Siguiente’s bed.*

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