

**variable
truths**

**a misshapen collection of
short stories**

**by
brian robert mccormick**

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<http://www.brianrobertmccormick.com/>

[email](#)

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Rocco's Machinery

Dreams, bright and ostentatious, the work of the interior reality. These are what Kierkegaard Tczezyk thought about as he lay in bed with a lit cigarette. He glanced to the bright, digital display that illuminated his walls and face with a red hue. 04:27. This was the fourth time sleep had deserted him that night. And he blamed it on the dreams.

Bright and ostentatious, he thought again and rolled his cigarette between his fingers, watched the smoke seep through the filter. Arrogant, happy visions that mocked him every time he drifted away. They should be the comforting enjoyment that soothed him through the dark night, but not these dreams. But why not? He couldn't quite understand. They were always happy dreams. Bright. Not gloomy or dreadful. But he felt there was something hiding inside them, something else. Something not him, not his mind. Or else his mind had turned against him. Kierkegaard considered this option, but his mind was a friend while he was awake. Yes, his mind was still on his side. It must be something else muddling about with his dreams in there, something unknown that crept in when he had no control. Whatever that something was, he knew one thing, it was arrogant. Ostentatious rolled in his thoughts. Arrogant, but more than conventional arrogance. This presence didn't go the easy, manageable route with nightmares he could understandably dislike. No, whatever was playing with his dreams enjoyed a more subtle game. It twisted his nocturnal reality into horrors masked in beauty, visions that looked perfect but felt detestable.

Kierkegaard blew on the burning ember of his cigarette and let the intensified heat sting his nose. Could he be losing his grip? Is this how crazy people felt? Ridiculous ideas of some mysterious force invading his dreams, making him unable to sleep by introducing sweet fantasies? A shrink was definitely not an option. A shrink would either say very predictable, very useless, things like, "What do you think?" and "The happiness

in your dreams probably reflect some unhappiness in your life," at best. And Kierkegaard was already involved in the act of understanding them in that matter, so there was no sense in wasting more of his time, and a ridiculous amount of his money, just to have someone tell him to do what he was already doing. At worst they might think he really was crazy and have him committed. With torturous dreams making a prison of sleep, what benefit would there be in waking to a physical prison?

Drugs? Could they help? Alcohol, he seemed to remember, could cause a person to skip dreams when used in large amounts. That could be a good drug for this problem. However, he didn't believe any drugs would actually stop the dreams, and what if they only gave his dream invader more control? He made a grim frown and mentally moved the idea of drugs into the "nice try" file in his brain. He had to find something to help though, otherwise the sleeplessness would surely begin to have some destructive effects on his life. Possibly even cause him to lose his job and apartment. Then what? Living on the streets with no money, regular people like himself passing by and shaking their heads at the crazy bum who existed as nothing more than a drain on their economy?

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Kierkegaard walked on the stained cement sidewalk in his dreary, gray city, between the dreary, gray buildings, beneath a dreary, gray sky, after a sluggish day of work. His eyes were rimmed almost as dark as a last stage junkie's and he had forgotten to wash his hair and shave his face. The only remaining part of himself that denoted him as a member of the respectable caste of society was the quality of his clothing. A fine business suit, mildly wrinkled from the day of work and an increasingly slumped posture, but still clean and expensive, and nicely polished brown, calfskin shoes.

However, he neither noticed nor cared about this distinction.

The streets reeked of garbage and rain, the garbage reeked of rats and salmonella. Dirty homeless vagrants did not bother him for handouts. Not for money, not for cigarettes. Kierkegaard took this as sign of his progression toward their company, a recognition by them of what he was becoming. Soon, they would talk to him, not in solicitation but in brotherly embrace.

A short man seized Kierkegaard by the sleeve of his coat. A midget, thought Kierkegaard, no, a dwarf he corrected himself. He was sure dwarves hating being

referred to as midgets. The little man pulled harder on Kierkegaard's sleeve when no obvious reaction was achieved.

"You need help," said the dwarf once this reaction was successful. The dwarf wore a thin green coat over a green vest, which partially covered a white tee shirt. His bottom half was protected by matching green slacks and boots. To Kierkegaard he appeared somewhere between an uptown artist, a college musician, and something that fell under the rainbow.

"Me?" asked Kierkegaard. "No, I'm fine. Just taking a walk on the way home. I don't live out here."

"Not that kind of help," said the dwarf. "I can see it inside of you. You have the disturbance."

"The disturbance?" asked Kierkegaard. "I'm perfectly sane, thank you."

"Sane, you say," replied the dwarf, "for now. How much longer can you maintain?"

"It's a tough world for everyone," said Kierkegaard. "I'm doing better than many others."

"For now, for now," said the dwarf. "It will destroy you if you don't rid yourself of it."

"What are you after?" asked Kierkegaard.

"I can help you," said the dwarf.

"Help me with what?" asked Kierkegaard.

"I can help you get him out of your dreams," offered the dwarf with a confident look into Kierkegaard's eyes. "I know what he is and how you can beat him."

"How do you know?" asked Kierkegaard, a new curiosity in his eyes.

"I am Kantanian von Bosch, practitioner of neglected science," pronounced the dwarf with a bow Kierkegaard found ridiculously dramatic and trite.

"Some kind of magician?" asked Kierkegaard.

"Magic is no more than unrecognized science," said Kantanian. "My profession is science, tested and proved."

"How can you help?" asked Kierkegaard.

"Come with me to my office," suggested Kantanian. "Everything is there."

Kierkegaard followed the artist, musician, dwarf, magician, practitioner of neglected science, and they mounted a subway car. They emerged from the subway in a cleaner section of the city and entered what looked to be a small shop with nothing to sell.

Kantanian locked the door behind them and led Kierkegaard to another room. This room held a collection of oddities that carried ideas of sorcery, renaissance medicine, and cheap brothel sleaze. Five enormous stacks of raunchy porn magazines lined one of the room's five walls.

"To our business," said Kantanian. "Please sit here." He gestured to an old dental chair.

"How much do you charge?" asked Kierkegaard.

Kantanian grimaced in response then wrote something on a piece of paper and handed it to Kierkegaard.

"You can't be serious," said Kierkegaard.

"Of course payment is not due until you have received satisfactory completion of my service," promised Kantanian. "Your satisfaction, of course. And I know my business well enough to be certain you will be satisfied enough to pay after we finish."

Kierkegaard levied the paper in the palm of his hand and stuck his lips together. "Okay, upon my satisfaction."

"That is the professional way," said Kantanian.

"So what do we do?" asked Kierkegaard, relaxing into the chair.

"You take this," Kantanian produced a pill.

"Drug therapy?" asked Kierkegaard.

"It's not a drug, it's a consciousness inducer."

"Is it legal?" asked Kierkegaard.

"It is not actually on any list of prohibited substances, and it is necessary," answered Kantanian. "After you take it you lie back and drift off to sleep. Once your go into the dream stage you will be able to see him."

"Where will you be?" asked Kierkegaard.

"I'll be right here, watching you and waiting," answered Kantanian.

"I have to take care of him myself?" asked Kierkegaard.

"Unfortunately I cannot go into your dreams," said the little practitioner. "It isn't possible. We are bound by the rules of reality."

"Okay, so how do I get rid of him?" asked Kierkegaard.

"Fill him with his own debris," stated Kantanian.

"What does that mean?" asked Kierkegaard.

"You'll understand when you get there. Now take the pill, lie back, and close your eyes."

Kierkegaard submitted to the instructions and the transition between closing his eyes and consciously entering the dreamworld was instantaneous for him.

A narrow, wire catwalk supported him, the catwalk not apparently supported by anything. It wasn't dark, but it wasn't light either. He could see well enough however, adjusted himself to the flexibility of the catwalk and moved forward.

So this is what my mind smells like, he thought. Mushrooms.

He walked for several minutes before his surroundings opened and he saw a man. The man was thin with dark hair, and not too tall, although not so small as a dwarf.

Kierkegaard watched the man wave his hands in the air, as if performing stage magic. Translucent gears spun around him like metaphysical machinery, translucent grease dripped in streams. Kierkegaard did not say anything yet. He watched the man work his craft, create the dream below them both. As he waved his hands welcoming landscapes evolved. Laughing children ran through a blooming meadow, holding hands and jumping over stones. The sun reflected off their faces as their clothes and hair bounced with the motion. On the opposite end of the meadow three women lounged beneath a tree like woodland goddesses, one with an exposed breast. They ate grapes, sipped a golden wine, and giddily kissed each other. Kierkegaard could smell the thick honey scent of the wine from where he stood. It was an enticing smell, pacifying. Behind their tree purple rosebushes visibly grew and spread into the meadow. Beyond that a large bay opened up to the sea. Sail and power boats drifted in the bay, people basked on their decks in the sun. Snow capped mountains outlined the horizon in the distance across the bay. Kierkegaard was certain he could actually see people skiing on them. He looked back to the conductor of this dream. He noticed that the grease from the gears dripped into the dream and disappeared. Well, almost disappeared. Kierkegaard focused his attention and saw the grease splash onto the scenery below, and that it didn't actually disappear but it became a nearly invisible coating. So this must be the subtle irritation he was experiencing. This byproduct of the dream gears.

He wondered where he was in this fantastic display. It was his dream after all, he must be somewhere. He scanned the scene, checked the joyous children. Was he one of them bounding through the meadow? No, he was sure neither of them was him. People

on the water, skiers on the mountain? No, none of them either. Perhaps one of the women under the tree. Dreams allowed all sorts of fascinating twists, he could be a woman. But no, he was none of them. A large glob of the grease dropped into their decanter of wine and filled it. Then he saw himself. He was lying in the grass in front of the three women. Kierkegaard watched as his dreamself sat up from the ground and one of the women, the one with the exposed breast, poured some of the wine into his mouth. His dreamself accepted the wine with a dumb smile and fell back to the ground.

They're feeding me that crap? thought Kierkegaard. Vomiting occurred to him, but he felt fine where he stood, despite the image of himself drinking that unknown gear lube.

"Hey," shouted Kierkegaard and advanced toward the man at the machinery.

"What?" turned the man. "What... what are you doing here?"

"Who are you?" demanded Kierkegaard.

"Why I'm Rocco, dreamtender, machinery operator," replied the man. "You shouldn't be here though. It isn't a place for you."

"Didn't expect me?" challenged Kierkegaard. " Toy with people when they're vulnerable, but here I am aware and prepared to teach you a lesson about manners."

"Stay back," warned Rocco. "I have great power."

Kierkegaard ignored the warning and relied on his greater size to overpower Rocco. He rushed forward and grabbed Rocco by the arms, effortlessly lifting him.

"Let me go, let me go," wailed Rocco. "You don't want to anger me."

Kierkegaard carried Rocco to the machinery and pushed his head beneath the gears.

"Don't do it," pleaded Rocco. "Don't..."

Kierkegaard forced Rocco's mouth open and let the gear lube pour inside it. Rocco gasped and choked but Kierkegaard remained steady until he was sure Rocco was filled completely, then he let the machine operator fall toward the dream below.

Rocco plummeted with a gurgling scream and when he hit Kierkegaard awoke in Kantanian's office and violently vomited.

A small figure covered in bile splashed onto the floor and Kantanian scooped it into a Plexiglas cage. Kantanian placed the cage on a desk and slid to Kierkegaard's side with a glass of water.

"Here," said Kantanian.

Slowly, Kierkegaard accepted the water and rinsed his mouth. He turned to the side and stepped away from the chair, moved to the desk with the cage. Bending down, he examined the drenched figure. Rocco was now no bigger than Kierkegaard's palm.

"Miscreant, little bastard," Kierkegaard said to Rocco.

Rocco said nothing in return.

"What do we do with him now?" asked Kierkegaard.

"I will dispose of him," answered Kantanian. "He's a dangerous creature and needs proper attention."

"Do I need to do anything else?" asked Kierkegaard.

"Pay and return to your normal life," said Kantanian, "if you are satisfied with my service."

"How do you want the payment?" asked Kierkegaard.

"Cash or charge," said Kantanian.

Kierkegaard handed him a credit card, Kantanian swiped it through a clean, electronic machine, and a paper printed. Kantanian ripped the paper from the machine then passed it and the credit card to Kierkegaard.

"Sign here please," requested Kantanian.

Signature given, receipt and card tucked into a pocket, Kierkegaard left the office with gratitude.

Kantanian opened the miniature Plexiglas door and Rocco shook himself clean.

"Ah, Rocchino, my friend, how are you feeling?"

"Prodigious," answered Rocco and stepped out of the cage.

The Voices

"I want to talk to you about the revolution."

"What revolution?"

"The revolution that's going on inside my head."

"There's a revolution in your head?"

"Yes, and it's fought by rabbits."

"Rabbits?"

"Yes, rabbits. Black and white rabbits, floppy eared rabbits, cotton tails... rabbits."

"What about it?"

"I want you to lead my army."

"Where's your army?"

"In my head. They're going to Cairo to purchase carrot carts to haul the militia men."

"They're going to haul militia men in carrot carts?"

"Only the live ones. The dead have to be carried by hand."

"What can I do?"

"You must guard the prime secrets."

"What are the prime secrets?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you."

"How can I guard them if I don't know them?"

"You'll be a decoy. The turtle will carry the secrets."

"What good will that do?"

"The red men will try to kill you to get the secrets - the turtle will safely cross over."

"Cross over where?"

"The cerebral cortex."

"In your head?"

"Of course."

"What good will that do?"

"What good will that do? That's where the whole revolution is going on."

"How do I get there?"

"You're already there."

"Am I?"

"Certainly, you've been there all along."

"Why did you ask me to join then?"

"Just a formality."

"What if I said no?"

"We'd have to kill you."

"We who?"

"The rabbits."

"How can the rabbits kill me?"

"We're multiplying... fast."

"Then why do you need me?"

"As a decoy for the turtle."

"That's right. Sorry, I forgot. When do I start?"

"When do you finish?"

"At the end."

"Did you live through the interrogation?"

"It's your head, you tell me."

"I can't, they've got you hidden from me."

"Who does?"

"The red men."

"The enemy?"

"No, they're our friends."

"Why do they want to kill me then?"

"They have to play their part - we all have to play our part."

"And my part is to die?"

"Only if you don't live."

"But I'm still alive."

"Then you made it through the interrogation."

"But what about..."

"Shh! We have to be quiet and hide. They're coming."

"Who's coming?"

"Shh!"

"Okay, they've passed, but keep an eye open. Not two, but one. Save one for battle."

"I have to fight?"

"Of course. This is a revolution after all."

"So you say."

"Follow me."

"Where are we going?"

"To the underground."

"What's there?"

"The rebels."

"Won't they kill us?"

"No, they're on our side, but I'm not sure which side that is."

"Isn't it the rebel side?"

"That's not what I mean. I'm talking about the cortex. I don't know if we're on the right side or the left side."

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters. The right side is the artistic side, and if we're on that side, then we have to make a plan of attack so insane it has to work, but if we're on the left side, the logical side, we have to make an organized plan that will surely succeed because of its logic."

"What about the other side? The non-rebel side?"

"What about them?"

"They have no chance of success."

"Of course they do. They will either succeed with a logical, formulated plan, or a wild, unexpected plan."

"But you can't have both sides win."

"No, both sides are losing."

"Then who's winning?"

"You are."

"Why?"

"You've escaped. Lucky you, too. The rabbits are all screaming in agony, and the red men are being disembodied by the turtle, who is having a stroke."

"Can't I help?"

"The rabbits are scared."

"Of my help?"

"They can't find their feet, and their springs are broken."

"Commander! Commander!" burst in a new voice.

"What?" asked the first voice.

"Catch," said the new voice.

"Catch what?" asked the first voice.

"Catch yourself before you fall off the edge," said the new voice.

"But if I go over the edge, I'm taking you with me," the first voice said, motioning to the second voice.

Live and Expired

There was once borne across a vast sea a concept so very powerful and alluring that it needed a name. To this concept the title "evil" was given. When borne across this sea, it was not done so by means of physical transportation, traveling in a unilateral direction, carried in a box.

Evil spread like the rays of a star, traveling without a vessel and flowing out in all directions. There was a feeling that accompanied this concept, and that feeling was what defined the evil.

In the beginning, there was a singular center of evil, and that center was a someone named Live. Life was in existence before Live became a concept and begun spreading at light speed his latter form of evil. This life was not the same as it would later be, but it somehow existed without happening and pleasure. Without birth and death.

One female lion, as there were fruitlessly two genders at the time, sat by a tree stump, immobile since the beginning of time. Others, all types of creatures, sat, stood, or lay at various places and in various positions, none taking any actions, speaking, or in any other way showing signs of being alive.

When Live first arrived, he walked through fields placidly contemplating the deathly silence that reminded him of his brother, Expire. So sullen and lifeless, like the many other places he had visited were when he would first arrive. Live did not know at the time that Expire would later become a concept also that would be misunderstood as an eternal, beautiful afterlife and renamed aspire.

As Live walked through the fields, he came across a lion, a great beast with powerful muscles and strong utilities. "What a shame," said Live, "that a creature of this magnificence should be so passive, immobile beyond necessity." Live touched the lion, and a flicker of movement washed over her body in a wave. Caressing the lion, Live gave

her the ability to become animate, and as she stretched out her far too unused legs, she turned to view Live.

"I don't know how to thank you. After spending time frozen, without a thought tracing my mind, you have touched me and pleasure spread through my entire body," said the lion. "You have made me feel the wonders of life, but I must confess the urge to eat the flesh of other animals. Is this not wrong?"

"No," replied Live. "That feeling is not wrong, it is natural to life, because with life comes pleasure, and with pleasure comes pain. When you accept the benefits of living, you must also accept its downfalls."

"Even these downfalls are better than the void that was existence before you came. Thank you for freeing me. Please do the same for all other creatures for they will also be thankful for life, but be cautious of the relatively hairless creatures that walk upright on their hind legs and have no tails. There is something unnatural about them."

"I will love all creatures and make them live, even those you warn me of, because unless you live, you have no life. Please live and accept the pleasure and pain as it comes."

"Is there any other way?" returned the lion.

Live continued traveling through the fields and forests and mountains and oceans and plains, touching, loving, and making live all the creatures he could find. Each time, his gift was warmly welcomed, and all creatures thanked him and promised to accept life as the gift it was, until he came to the creatures the lion had mentioned.

As he bestowed life upon this unique division of creature, there was an extreme release of pleasure as he loved the first human woman. This pleasure was strongly enjoyed at first, then as his gift spread among them, one of these creatures turned, and in him arose jealousy, and he denounced the gifts of Live and took a woman, referring to her as "wife" and said it was wrong for her to experience the pleasures that came from Live, and that she should only experience pleasure from him. She tried to tell him that without Live none of them could experience any pleasure, but he would not listen and demanded that Live leave.

Live continued his journeys and thought that it may have been a mistake to touch these creatures, but it was already done.

After Live had presented his gift to these humans, they began to deeply resent him and wished to return to their former state of existence. They formed institutions and renamed him Evil, not the gift giver of life, but an unwanted concept. Along with this rejection of Live's gifts, they created theories that said the desired state was that in which they existed before Live came. This was the state that so resembled Live's brother Expire, only they called it Aspire, the perfect condition that was void of the gifts of Live. The condition to which they expected to return when their lives expired.

Absolution

"You should pay him," said Mike, slowly turning his head from the television to Joseph on the next barstool.

"It's none of your business."

"You made an agreement with him, and he came through. You owe him."

"Listen! That was a ridiculous agreement. Nobody could have expected he would actually do it, and I'm keeping my money."

"All I'm saying is that if you agreed..."

"Don't lecture me about what's right and wrong," said Joseph, slamming his beer on the bar. "I go to church every Sunday, confess my sins to the priest, pray to God for forgiveness, and live a pious life. When's the last time you were ever in a church? Have you ever been? Damn, drug using atheist," he muttered.

"This doesn't have anything to do with religion. If I made you a promise, I'd come through."

"Shut up. If you owed me money, it would probably go to buy that marijuana you and your friends are always smoking. Don't think I don't know. I've seen you doing it outside. Try understanding God before you tell me what's what."

"I probably know more about your religion than you do," said Mike, lighting a cigarette.

"But you don't know shit about my God."

"I know about *your* god," said Mike, then stood up and walked toward the door.

"Fucking idiot," Mike heard behind him. "Hey, Heidi! Get me another beer, and a fresh glass. This one's filthy."

Hanging his coat up, Mike shook his head, thinking about Joseph, then went to his refrigerator and poured himself a glass of cherry Kool-Aid. Sitting down on the couch, he heard a knock at the door and pushed his glass aside as he went to answer it.

"Good afternoon," said the friendly face on the other side, when Mike opened the door. "I'm Steve, and I was wondering if I might have a few minutes of your time." Mike looked at the bible in Steve's hand and smiled.

"Certainly. Please, come in. My name is Mike."

"Nice to meet you, Mike. Tell me, Mike, have you received the Lord, Jesus Christ, as your savior?"

"Not exactly."

"If you have some time, I'd like to tell you about his miracles, and how we know the end times are near, and we must prepare for the coming of the kingdom."

"Huh, you want me to see what you see. Please, have a seat, and this here's my offer. If you look at things through my vehicle of relation," said Mike, unbuttoning one of his shirt sleeves, "I'll join your following for one month."

It is said that one day the Messiah will come and with Him unsurmountable violence, coerced by Pestilence, Famine, Incest, and full sewn Armageddon. When the swelter of the Coming boils into that dust with which God, Jove, YHVH, Yahweh (depending on translation) created Adam, pulling the last of the famed Judeo-Christian pacifism and its bloody shepherd's staff to the end of its brotherly love and salvation, the blood will evaporate and in its place will stand the golden streets of Jerusalem and the few pure souls who made it. Down to these wielders of life fluid stained Bibles will come the previously departed pure souls to live forever in the peaceful ambiance of His presence.

"And such wonderful eternity will last until the sun burns away and the planet is left dead, sucked into a nova of exploding hydrogen," said Mike, wadding his soggy gum into a page from Revelation. "Tell me, please, how could your god be The God if he didn't come into existence until after all these other religions?"

"Originally, there was one true faith," said the clean shaven, well dressed door-to-door salesman of Christ, "before the flood when God found mankind had become vile and wished to give this creation a second chance, sending Noah to sea, while He flooded the world, cleansing the evil. When Noah's family began to replenish the populace, the

true faith still existed, but again man tried to rebel against God, and this is where we stopped being able to understand each other."

"Where's that in the Bible?"

"Let me find it," said Steve. "Yes, here it is, Genesis 11: 'Now all the earth continued to be of one language and of one set of words. And it came about that in their journeying eastward they eventually discovered a valley plain in the land of Shi'nar, and they took up dwelling there. And they began to say, each one to the other: "Come on! Let us make bricks and bake them with a burning process." So brick served as stone for them, but bitumen served as mortar for them. They now said: "Come on! Let us build ourselves a city and also a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a celebrated name for ourselves, for fear we may be scattered over all the surface of the earth.

"And Jehovah proceeded to go down to see the city and the tower that the sons of men had built. After that Jehovah said: "Look! They are one people and there is one language for them all, and this is what they start to do. Why, now there is nothing that they may have in mind to do that will be unattainable for them. Come now! Let us go down and there confuse their language that they may not listen to one another's language." Accordingly Jehovah scattered them from there over all the surface of the earth, and they gradually left off building the city. That is why its name was called Ba'bel, because Jehovah had scattered them from there over all the surface of the earth."

"Okay, so let me think about this a minute. First, your god wanted to destroy this tower, because it would allow mankind to become his equal? They would be able to do anything they imagined?"

"Yes, the evils of mankind would have no limits."

"So, He is fearful of the human race."

"Only in its ignorant strife for power..."

"Yeah, sure. Now this tower would have reached heaven if it were finished?"

"God's very own."

"What I think is this: your god — wait, it wasn't just one. Doesn't he say, 'Let *us* go down.'"

"Yes, that's what it says," Steve fingered the line.

"So, it's not just a god, but multiple gods."

"Not exactly, the *us* refers to God and His angels."

"Good," Mike tapped his glass. "Then you admit that your god wasn't alone up there?"

"Certainly not."

"Certainly not admitting that, or certainly not alone?"

"Not alone."

"Splendid. Now, this is what I figure. This god of yours was part of, the head of to be exact, a society of beings superior to us."

"Well, yes, the angels are superior to humans."

"And up in heaven, as in up in the heavens, is space, quite literally, and in Ba'bel, or Babylon if you will, their attempt was to go up physically. Reaching physically toward the heavens, or space, the sky, was a threat to this god. Since this was written long after the account, after perhaps human society had already grown as we have today, then was beaten back to the ages of stone and wood, the best possible explanation of this tower was a space ship. A shuttle, or other type. The reason this would threaten your god was because he and his angels were merely more advanced beings who were already at the point of progressive space travel, and they knew when we harnessed the ability to leave earth and explore the dark unknown, their farce would be blown."

"No, that's impossible. God created man and this earth and the lights in the heavens to use as signs."

"Be that as it may, how do you explain the tower being built to physically reach the heavens?"

"It's a sort of metaphor, probably something more like a shrine to Satan, who would bring them into the realm of angels."

"Good, so you admit your holy books apply metaphor to convey their messages, and that your religion is simply making an attempt at interpreting them. But the Israelites didn't go for that meek shall inherit shit and only rewards in heaven. In the Old Testament, there was prosperity on earth for the faithful, riches that could be used in the market place. Take the story of Job for example."

"And then Christ came to correct the misconceptions and return the strayed masses to the flock. The Jewish people were no longer following the ways of God. They misinterpreted and lived unjustly. Our Savior Jesus Christ came to show them the path

back to righteousness, so they could redeem themselves." Standing, Steve as of yet ignoring the offer of a seat his host had given upon entrance, he shifted his bible from one hand to the other. "Look here, I have some literature you can have that shows the miracles of God."

"I will agree that the symbolic and physical appearance of your Christ was to return a lost, divine element to the people, and I'll look at your propaganda, but what is most convincing to me is personal interaction. Given time, arguments can be impressively conceived on paper, but that's not what will persuade me. You still haven't said anything about my offer."

"Trading one day for one month?"

"Yes, if you give me one day, I will give you one month."

"During that month you would abide by our rules and live as we do?" Moving closer, Steve neared the sofa.

"My time will be completely dependent upon your ways."

"And what must I do for this one day you ask, besides using that devil tool?"

"It won't even be a full day, merely what's left of this one. All you essentially have to do is continue discussing these matters with me, and whatever else might come up in conversation. My request isn't much, nearly the same as yours, viewing the world from each other's perspective. Only I'm willing to trade a month, and more if I become convinced, for less than twenty-four hours of your life."

"No Satanic chanting or telling people God is a hoax?"

"Whatever you wish to say, you can say. Nothing Satanic or any of that crap. Everything can be as it might if we sat here as we are, talking for hours, only you have to live this one aspect of *my* life."

"If God has ever given me a gift it was being able to tell honesty in a person, and if you swear to me that you will devote one month to our cause, I give you this day." Sitting on the far end of the couch, Steve rested his bible on the floor, motionlessly looking at Mike.

"I swear on my existence as a mortal, if you do this, my life for the next month is in your hands."

"Fine. What are we going to do now?"

Standing, Mike looked down at Steve, skipped across the room and opened a deep drawer at his desk, removing a large, brown stained wooden box which he spirited over to the coffee table. Unlatching the box, he withdrew various oddities, including a metal stand and a burner fitting into the lower half of it, a smaller wooden box, roughly the size of a pencil holder only twice as thick, something sealed in a paper package, a length of surgical tubing, and a plastic bag containing an eggshell colored powder.

"Cocaine?" Steve squinted.

"Cocaine is shit. This is far better," Mike smiled.

"Isn't that stuff dangerous?"

"Not if it's used responsibly. That's the problem with people who use too often, they forget that excessive amounts can kill you, as their never ending quest for the ultimate high drives them harder and harder. I do it, tops, a couple times a month, sometimes as little as once a year. Enough to enjoy it, but always staying conscious of avoiding addiction."

"Uh, I don't want to put my life at risk for this."

"Don't worry, you're only lending a few hours. Intelligent users research and know how much is harmful, and I know what a first timer's limit is, so your well being will not be in jeopardy." Opening the smaller box, he pulled out a syringe and screwed a shining needle to it.

"Sharing needles isn't safe from what I hear..."

"The world isn't safe from what I hear," Mike laughed. "But no, I'm just amusing myself over here, don't fret so much, a fresh needle is safely stored in that package there." Ripping open the paper package, he took the unused syringe and set it on top of the paper so Steve could see it for himself. Lighting the burner, he adjusted the flame until finding a setting that seemed to satisfy him. "Oh, I almost forgot." Quickly gliding to the kitchen, he returned with a two gallon pail.

"What's that for?"

"You'll see. We may not even need it, but I'd rather have it here and not use it than need it and have it out of reach." Dropping some water onto a slim metal tray, he mixed a bit of the powder in it and put the tray in the stand, over the flame. When the mixture was heated to his liking, he took the fresh syringe and sucked in the liquid. "Roll up your sleeve, please."

Frowning, Steve shed his suit coat and unbuttoned the cuff on his shirt, pushing the sleeve up to his bicep. Mike pushed the sleeve up farther and tied the surgical tubing around his arm, slapping his fingers on the bend in Steve's elbow.

"Do you work out? These are some great veins; a serious junkie might kill you if he could pull 'em out and stick 'em in his own arm." Steve didn't say anything, but sat and stared at the swelling veins. Holding up the syringe, Mike tapped it and pushed out the air bubbles, then held it between his teeth. Kneeling, he put one hand on Steve's knee and took his exposed arm in the other, turning it, examining the vessel that would soon carry his viewpoint. "I think you'll like this." Taking the syringe from his mouth, he pushed the needle into the largest, bluest vein and partially depressed the plunger, pulled it back, mixing the dark flow of blood into the liquid, then fully discharged the contents into Steve's arm, removed the syringe and untied the tubing.

Being free of Mike's grasp, Steve didn't move a single part of his body for several seconds but remained silent and still until he began convulsing and his breathing increased.

"Here," Mike pushed the pail in front of his face. "Don't worry, it usually happens if the shit's good. At least when you're not used to it, that is. Just let it all go. Everything feels better that way, so don't hold it back, and I'll get you a glass of water." Handing him the glass, Mike returned to the table and took his personal syringe from the smaller box, preparing his fix.

"Oh, my God," Steve exhaled after rinsing his mouth with water and spitting it into the pail. "Is it always so, um, so, whew, so, ah, Oh My God."

"As long as you use the right stuff it is."

"The pictures... they're snapshots. I mean... when I put the bucket down, and the water, it looked like someone took black and white frames of everything and is showing them to me in half second intervals."

"Kind of a rush, isn't it?"

"Like a vision."

Rolling down his sleeve, Mike carefully gathered the paraphernalia and replaced it in the drawer. Lighting a cigarette, he sat back against the couch and blew a long stream of smoke.

"How is it?"

"Singular."

"There's nothing like it in the world. Some people even say it's better than sex."

"I wouldn't know, I'm not married."

"You're married to life, aren't you?"

"I'm married to God."

"That god's a bitch, a bad wife. He'll marry anyone who will marry him. That's no kind of marriage for a man."

"That's not true, you have to be obedient."

"Obedient? In love, everything should be equal."

"It's not that type of thing, besides, I can take a wife if I want."

"Why don't you then? It has to be awful hard going through life without the affections of a woman."

"When I find the right woman I will."

"I guess there's one thing we have in common already. The eternal quest for the ideal mate. Don't know how many girlfriends I've had. Some were so fabulous, but finding that perfect one... that's the trick, isn't it?"

"Uh huh."

"Were your parents deliverers of the Good News?"

"Huh? No, they raised me as a Mennonite," Steve stopped and stared at the ceiling for a minute, "but I found the true path when I went to college."

"Yeah? Kind of the same as me. I also discovered the truth at school. Liked it so much I went to grad school in a bigger city, better drugs."

"I found the truth in religion."

"So did I. Drugs are similar to church, you see, only they don't restrict you, instead they open up alleys you didn't even know existed. True religion, not presumptuous church."

"Well, they do something I've never experienced." Steve stared at the fingers on his right hand as he rubbed them with his thumb. "And the church does open alleys, some of the deeper ones..." began Steve, watching his hand waving in the air, "but there are some rules that don't make much sense."

"Though they vary in speculative theories and dogmas, all houses of the Great One God are worthy of recognition. Even so, they are but a guide. It is for you to pursue truth,

and experience can only make you a better person. A better believer. You can't understand where you are unless you understand where you aren't."

"Like Christ. He didn't ignore the sinners, he lived with them, knew that repentance comes best from those who sin most. They need a greater amount of forgiveness, so they give more. A good example of that is Mary, um, Mary, oh darn, I forget, my mind... is looking a thousand different directions right now."

"Mary Magdalene."

"Yes, thank you. Mary was a prostitute, a whore, a sinner to a great extent, and she came and anointed the feet of Jesus with precious oils when his merchant host would offer nothing."

"Mary Magdalene was a priestess, of noble birth. The anti-sexual church of woman haters created those lies about her that you have been trained to believe."

Mike bent forward and lit another cigarette, looking at the reflective surface of his Zippo, watching the thick flame leap on its own accord. Pushing the cigarette pack back on the table, he stared at the dim reflection of himself, features contorted, the flame seemed to rise straight out of his head if he concentrated hard enough. It was an introspective process, he thought, seeing himself in that way.

He drove all his attention toward that lighter, rubbing his thumb on its side, the smooth, metallic skin welcoming his touch, feeling solid and real, crafted in Bradford, it was heavy and pure, always reliable. The face dancing didn't look quite as stable, bouncing in the light of the fire, caught in the side of the lighter, yet not the same as the lighter itself, different, separate.

"Touch me."

Mike snapped the Zippo shut and looked over to Steve. He reached out his hand and put it on Steve's arm.

"Thank you. I needed to make sure I was real, it was as if I was floating in an abyss, the boundaries of reality very thin and awkward to see, but I knew they were there, only I wasn't sure which side I was on, which side anything was on. It made me think I didn't know what was real, what was truth."

"It's often that way."

"May I have one of your cigarettes?"

Mike handed the pack of Marlboros and lighter to Steve.

"What was I talking about before?" asked Steve.

"The virtues of sin."

"Oh, yes. The virtues of sin... it is only through sin that forgiveness can be achieved, and those who sin the most can receive the largest pardon."

"Don't the more faithful followers deserve more forgiveness?"

"They don't owe as much, so they don't give as much, therefore if the worst sinners give more repentance, they deserve more in return."

"Then what do think about a case like Job?"

"Have you ever read Chaucer's Canterbury Tales? The Clerk's Tale, originally written by Boraccio, mirrors the biblical story of Job."

"I think I remember that one. With Griselda, the faithful and obedient wife."

"The foolish wife who was so obedient she allowed her husband to do whatever he wanted, including getting rid of their children. Like Isaac and Abraham, when God made Abraham take his son up to the mountain and prepare to sacrifice him, only stopping him before the deed was done, saying how he proved his obedience and fear of God. That's what happens in the Clerk's Tale, where Griselda is finally put to the test of preparing her unknown daughter for marriage to her own husband, then he, uh, what's his name?"

"Walter?"

"Walter. Walter finally decides she has passed enough of his tests and tells her the truth. It's very evil to do something like that, and it showed her to be a fool, just like Abraham, fool enough to sacrifice their very own children in blind faith, expecting nothing in return, not that anything is as important as one's own children."

"But it was done in the respect of deserving obedience. Obedience that surpasses family, surpasses life itself."

"To sacrifice someone else, someone's life, your child's life is unspeakable, and to ask that someone do that thing is as evil as any rape."

"If these things are done to prove a point and not to hurt..." started Mike.

"They hurt in themselves just being asked without the action taken. If you think this sort of thing is so earnestly done, meant only to show faith, then look at the story of Job, who lets his family be killed without lifting a boiled finger or accusing He who let this happen. Job was rewarded in an earthly fashion for letting God prove His point and let his family be killed, still maintaining his devotion the whole time, like a spineless fool. And

fool he was, as is anyone that would allow the murderer of his children to remain highest in his heart."

"But The Satan was the one who made all these horrible tragedies occur."

"But it was The God who allowed it to happen." Steve stood up from the couch and walked over to the desk. Beholding his suit and the bible which rested on the floor, Mike looked up to Steve, then noticed the sun was starting to show on the horizon through the window. Opening the drawer, Steve pulled out the box and brought it over to the coffee table, laying its contents about the glass top. Lighting the burner, as he had seen Mike do earlier, he put water in the tray, added a little more of the powder than before, mixed it, then withdrew it into his syringe.

"Don't use too much," Mike said, "because when you first start, it's easier to overdose."

Sitting back on the couch, Steve tied off his arm and injected the drug, cautious to pull the blood back out before fully compressing the plunger, Mike patiently watching in case he did it incorrectly. Setting the syringe on the table and untying the surgical tubing, Steve lit a cigarette and relaxed.

Disappearing into his bathroom, Mike showered then walked into his bedroom with a towel around his waist, leaving Steve alone in the living room. As Steve turned the Zippo around in his hand, watching the smoke float from his lips, into the air, dissipating as it went, Mike appeared from behind the bedroom door, dressed in a finely pressed suit.

He walked across the living room, stopped to pick up the bible which lay on the floor and continued on to the front door. Turning, he looked down at Steve on the couch and opened the door.

"Now I must fulfill my part of our bargain and learn to show people the path," he said, "but I will be back to check on the strength of your soul," then closed the door behind him.

Star Fishing

Oh, my Trixie Lou Who was a very curious being, curious in the sense not of being extremely mysterious, but more the way a nearly perfect moon rests calmly in the sky above a beach welcoming soft, full swells out of the Gulf. Who, one might have asked, is Trixie Lou? Certainly that was the wrong question, because of course, she was Trixie Lou Who, not who, as in, who are you, but Who are you, and you are Who. Only the real Who was Trixie Lou, and nobody but the Grinch, God, and myself knew.

"Trixie who?" asked Adam. "Where'd you meet her?"

"Trixie Lou Who," said I, "and I found her riding on a moon beam."

"How appropriate, a moon beam. A little melodramatic, don't you think? C'mon, really, as in, tell me about her in real life terms, not some poetic wannabe crap. How old is she? What does she look like?"

"A demon, maybe, or a dolphin."

"What? Ground control to major Tom. Do I get the full tour or the acid version through side streets here?"

"I'm not trying to sound flaky or weird. That happens to make some sense to me, but I suppose you want to hear something like she's blond, skinny, beautiful breasts that just impale your attention, and so forth. When you look at her though, there's more. A pinch of devilry in her eyes, if you will, and the universal attractiveness of a dolphin. So you see, the way I started describing her makes more sense."

"But it sounded so obscure." Adam put a cigarette in his mouth and began patting around at his pockets. "Got a light?"

"Sure," I said, holding forth my lighter for him, then getting a cigarette of my own.

"So, she's hot?"

"You're really trying to bastardize my views, aren't you? Sure, if you saw her you'd want to fuck her. What I'm attempting to get at here is that she's more than hot, she's Trixie Lou Who."

"Sounds like a hooker's name to me."

"Yeah, the fucking special of the day."

"When do I meet her?"

"How should I know? I said we met, not got married."

"You talk about her like she's Venus' little sister or the next on your girlfriend list."

"If you meet her you'll understand."

Certainly, the Grinch would have known better. At least he knew what was a Who. What could you say? After all, no one was going to take you seriously when you said she was riding a moon beam. How could you possibly take yourself seriously? In a letter to God, I had once asked for a comet ride, or at least better acid. He never responded, and I kept getting gut rot, so I stopped waiting. Same kind of thing with Santa, but I was five then, and I had asked for sex. No response, but somehow my parents found out, and they weren't too happy. We got a new babysitter the next week. Reminded me of those old, dead women in the black and white movies they used to show on Saturday afternoons, and she was mean.

Of course, I figured out the truth about Santa after awhile, how he was really Satan, and his elves like to hide in your room, waiting for you to go to bed, poking you with the sharp end of a feather when you've barely gotten to sleep. That didn't bother me for too long either, because I finally resigned myself to getting apartments with an extra bedroom, where I made up one room to look like I used it all the time, but at night I put a mannequin in the bed and usually slept on the couch. Those elves can be annoying, but they aren't extremely bright. More like a convenience store flashlight than a mag light. Halogen unavailable in their model.

Holding a flashlight in one hand, Trixie Lou stood by the lake that night, waving it around and around, pointed skyward, as I walked to the water, having a fit of insomnia. Seeing her, my pace slowed, and I watched her curiously, marveling at what I was unsure, and glancing up into the darkness to find whatever it was she looked for. Finding nothing but the night sky up there, I lit a cigarette and studied her instead. Such a petite body, yet with the boldness of an animal that knows you have fear, or at least the strength

of a pole vaulting hooker who was recently signed to the Olympic games because she so closely resembled an Ancient Greek native, in spirit if not costume.

And on she waved, torch bearer of night, succubus of the dark, abbess of untamed culture. Her church held no pulpit, nor was there a plate passed which was not done to give instead of receive, holding a flower for each sheep, stating lamb is not cannibalism, but fulfillment of everything Mary stood for as Jesus waited in her line, watching as a voyeur in a loose robe, unsure where to plant his mustard seed. The dance was mystical, from Mary to Jesus, Salome to Herod, Trixie to the World. As her dance continued, truths were thinly shaved away into questions, curiosity to attention, stability to a vagabond of uncertainty, and the church was free, the gods were dead, and the worship recognizable. Then my cigarette burned my fingers, and a squelp escaped.

"Hello?" Trixie said, looking my way. "Who's there?"

"Just me," said I, trying to soothe my burnt finger in my mouth while walking up to her.

"Oh, hi. You surprised me. What are you doing here?"

"Insomnia. Say, what are you doing with that flashlight?"

"Fishing for stars," she said, continuing to wave the beam of light in the sky.

"Excuse me? Did you say fishing for stars?"

"Yes." She waved the light intently, then looked at me. "Haven't you ever tried it?"

"I've never actually heard of it. What is it? Um, you can't mean that literally."

"Oh, absolutely. The only way to catch one is by using a light. Of course, a huge spotlight might work better, but this flashlight will do. See?" she said, pointing it at my face. "It's pretty bright," as my eyes lived in flash burn for a minute.

"You're really trying to catch a star?"

"Really. They aren't all that easy to catch. If they were, there wouldn't be any left. You have to have patience, and therefore you have to have time. Both of which I do have, and adding that to my flashlight, there's everything a person needs to fish for stars. You see, the only way to catch one is by using light, since they are light themselves, other lights are like mating calls, or at least friendly invitations."

"Interesting. Do you mind if I sit here with you and watch?"

"Not at all. Despite how much I enjoy this fishing, it does get boring and lonely sometimes."

The chance to observe star fishing was too much for me to pass up; it held such a romantic, poetic notion, and my being a self-proclaimed artist, all things insane were by definition my duty to embrace and acknowledge. So I sat next to Trixie and watched her light float across the sky, a lure for perky stars. The whole idea of it was so exciting, just being there I knew I surpassed those normal, boring mortals, and soon I became tired and fell asleep with my head in her lap.

A dove-like hand on my head woke me, and I saw the sun would be coming up soon. Half stuck in the dream state, I looked up and smiled at the fisher of stars, sure she would catch one soon, and thinking maybe I could learn to do the same. She smiled back down at me and gently lifted my head.

"Come on," she said, "it's too bright to fish anymore." Taking me by the hand, Trixie led the way as we walked along the shore, her humming and I watching the water lap against the land. After awhile, we came to a moderately sized house on the water, and she unlocked the back door and ushered me inside.

"You live here?" I asked.

"Well, yes."

"Oh, of course," I said, understanding. "People would get suspicious if you didn't have a house to go to." Looking at me, she laughed and made a strange, cute expression with her face, so I knew we understood each other, then she brought me upstairs.

"What's this?"

"My bedroom."

"Of course, to go with the house." Another cute face and brief laugh.

"Generally it works that way." Then she took off her clothes, and as she moved to the bed, I realized how odd it must be for her to have to cover herself like humans who are afraid to let themselves be seen in their true form. Her form and manners were so unhindered by societal aspects I was almost shocked, but I remembered she was beyond normal human understanding, and I could do no more than look and admire. "Come here," she said, sitting on the bed. Moving to her, my feet stopped directly in front of her, and she reaching forward, released me, piece by piece, from my prison of fabricated humanity. As I lay there in her arms, I could hear the whisperings of gods, only hoping they found me worthy; after all, I was more than a human, I was an artist.

We got up in the early afternoon, had a late breakfast on Main Street, and walked down to the park to browse the shops at the city's yearly festival. She found a colorful beaded necklace with a crystal in the middle and bought it for me, saying it seemed to fit my eyes in some strange manner I couldn't understand, then we walked on, passing rides and booths of your various carnival sort, my trying to win her a prize at some, but never quite able to do it, although she didn't seem to mind, so I was happy in spite of my apparent failure.

Going to the other side of the park, where there were some teepees and other odd attractions, we ran into Adam and some friend of his I didn't know very well, all of us continuing to the other side as a group. While Trixie was looking at a tarot stand, and Adam's friend talking to a man dressed in deer skins, Adam pulled me to the side, away from both of them.

"So that's Trixie, huh?" he said, nodding over in her direction. "Quite the hot, little Betty."

"Well, she doesn't have the limitations of humans."

"She looks a little young, though, doesn't she?"

"Obviously," I said, trying to keep my voice down so the people around us wouldn't hear. "Immortals don't have the problem of aging, so they always appear in their prime. Trixie isn't flawed like the rest of us."

"Sometimes it's so hard to talk to you with all that gibberish spouting out your pie hole. Someday you'll have to learn to live in the real world, you know? Chics dig that mushy, flowery shit, though, makes 'em hot, huh."

Adam was great; he understood, and he was pretty smart, so he always talked in code to make sure the normal people didn't figure it out and get scared.

Trixie and I went star fishing a few more times, then she couldn't come out with me late at night anymore, probably some private moon ritual mortals weren't allowed to witness, so most of our time together was spent during the day. Then one evening as we were sitting, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes, she looked outside through the door below the clocks and stood up.

"I didn't realize," she said, "it's time for me to go home now."

"Oh," I said, looking outside and seeing the full moon I understood, "the moon."

"You're so cute and funny," she said and kissed me.

"I'll miss you."

"Bye bye," she said, smiling, and left.

This day had been bound to come, I knew, but it seemed to take me by surprise. I guess when things are so fun and happy, you forget the inevitable, but it put an uneasy feeling in me, so when I went back to my apartment that night, it was apparent what I had to do.

I stayed up all night, packing my belongings, stuffing boxes and bags of things to bring to Saint Vinnie's, deciding what I could sell, and what could be brought along. By morning, everything was amazingly in order, and I stopped by a pawn shop to sell a few things, then an electronics store to get rid of my computer, and on and on, until finally I sold my car to a dealership last, since I needed it to get around to all the other places first. Taking a taxi, I got my bags, went to the bus station and bought a ticket to the nearest airport.

The flight to France was a long and tiring one, and would you believe it, I could have kept my computer after all. Who would have known they had electricity over there already? This was probably best anyway; after all, good writers only use pen and paper. All the electronic gadgetry takes everything that's real out of your work. Europe was definitely the place for me to go; people sat on the beaches naked, just the way the immortals did, and you could hang out in great coffee shops and talk about poetry the way Americans never could understand.

Most nights I still sit up and watch the sky, especially during a full moon, in case Trixie Lou Who comes riding a moon beam back down. I wish she wouldn't have left, but at least I learned how to fish for stars, which I do quite frequently, although I haven't caught one yet.

Eternal Blysse

Waves crest onto the beach. Soft, shallow waves, not very high. Lucky just to catch a night with any waves on the east side of the Gulf of Mexico. Tiny, broken bits of shell make up the covering of the beach in a sparkling illuminance of white, beautiful to look at, but not as soft as the actual sand of the beaches of California. A pale husk rolls up on the beach under the pressure of the waves, slimly visible in the green glow of the moon. Dirty, wet reindeer circle a red sweater.

There had been a lecture, some few days before, and a man had been speaking on the aspects of drama, supposedly centered on Shakespeare, but wandering endlessly around a certain realm of logic apparent only to himself. A university in Southwestern Florida, a sensual, warm location, was the host of the lecture series, professors from all around the globe collected to talk or be talked to. When this speaker was at the podium, on the edge of being one of the most interesting educators the audience had ever seen, his weak grasp of social normality kept him slipping into knowledgeable tediousness.

Strapped to their seats, as nearly all of them felt, this went on for a hefty three hours, nary a second being left without the continuous flow of words, whose monotony would occasionally be separated by a laugh coming from some cheaply constructed synapse. Although this performance was drawn-out and somewhat light in its entertainment value, the knowledge professed was quite thorough, enough to contain some who did have adequate interest to hear the parts which discussed illegal acts of dramatic entertainment conducted in various places about the world to this very day. These people left a ticket and a note at the speaker's hotel.

When the speaker, Blysse Morton Roberts, arrived at his hotel, he received the note at the front desk, addressed: "Esteemed Doctor Roberts, after witnessing your brilliant

speech earlier today, my colleagues and I would like to invite you to a privileged performance held this evening, and this evening only. Our seating is very limited and in high demand, so all apologies for only being able to spare you one ticket. A car will be around to your hotel at 9:00 p.m. We would be flattered if you could be so kind as to accept our invitation." Curious, and excited at having his ego stroked, Professor Roberts arranged a dinner at the hotel then scurried to his suite to move a bowel and ready himself, which neither consisted of showering, nor changing into fresh clothing or tying his mismatched shoes.

Precisely at 9:00, a virginally polished white limousine pulled up to the front of the hotel, and a bellboy rang for Professor Roberts, who promptly made his appearance and accepted his ushering into the car. Despite questions, the driver wore a masque sans bouche, leaving the astute professor to wonder what was to come.

The drive took the better part of an hour, arriving at a highly secured estate on oceanfront property, separated from any other buildings as far as sight allowed. Stopping in front of a well lit entryway of brilliantly white marble columns and steps, the chauffeur came around to the back of the car and opened the door, motioning toward the steps. Professor Roberts followed his cue and walked up the stairs, into the building.

"Good evening, Professor Roberts," greeted a tall man in a dark green Italian suit and an accent as bland as the fields of Idaho. "I'm pleased you could make it to our little performance. Most everybody is already seated, but there is still some time before curtain call, so please enjoy some refreshments in the next room. There's wine, champagne, strawberries, cheese, sandwiches, and the sort." Blyse Roberts attempted to question the man about the content of the show but was informed he must wait to experience it first hand. "No worry, it will be quite exciting."

Choosing a draught of burgundy wine and a plate of cheese, he continued on to the theater room. This theater was surprisingly humble and private, containing no general seating, but only two or three dozen separate boxes. An usher approached and asked to see his ticket, then led him to a box directly in front of center stage. No one else was seated in his box, and the usher carried back an extra carafe of wine and a selection of cheese. After several minutes of waiting, during which he dared not disturb any other guests to ask about the upcoming performance, the lights dimmed, and a spot widened on the stage.

The man who met him at the entrance to the building walked out on stage and met his audience with a flute of champagne.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen. We, speaking for myself and the rest of our staff, are delighted you could join us this evening to witness the rare performance that shall begin shortly. In this day and age, such shows are hard to come by and we do our best to provide you with the pinnacle of unequalled entertainment. For those of you who may be interested, our next show will be held four weeks from now in Rome, and there have been a few tickets set aside for sale after tonight's exhibition. You may also make arrangements for other future productions at that time. Our ushers will be happy to get you anything you might want during the performance, so please remain seated to avoid distraction. Once again, we are delighted you could make it, and enjoy the show."

The spot faded as he walked off stage, and after a moment of darkness, the curtain was raised along with soft stage lights. Actors appeared quietly under the lights, motionless until the luminosity reached its intended intensity.

A frightened looking young woman with strong, pretty features and full lips sat in a wooden chair, her long, brown hair falling around her yellow flower print dress. At either side stood a man, one black, tall, with short hair and an immense physique. The other white, average height, long, black hair held by a barrette, also well built. Each man knelt at the sides of the chair and took either of the woman's hands and tied them down with straps of leather then did the same with her feet.

The white man then stood up and bent over, putting his face up to the woman's. She turned her head away as he attempted to kiss her, but he grabbed her by the jaw and forced her to look at him then put his mouth on hers. She kept her mouth tightly clenched as he kissed, but then he used his other hand to give him leverage to open it enough to insert his tongue.

Now the black man moved over in front of the chair and unzipped his pants. As the chair was directly in front of Professor Roberts, he could not see all of what was happening, but he could hear the stifled cries of the woman.

Both men moved back to the sides of the chair and stood still for a moment as the woman breathed heavily. The long haired man reached over to a small table behind the chair and brought out a silver dagger. Lifting the shoulder straps of the woman's dress, he cut first the right, then the left, letting them fall over her bosom. Running the tip of the

blade along her shoulder, he brought it to her neck then laid it flat against the underside of her chin. She bit her lower lip and her eyes were clamped tight, as he did this. Next, he cut a slit at the top of her dress, in the front, then stood back.

Here, the short haired man reached over and slowly began tearing the fabric aside, careful not to rip anything but the dress. He continued this until it was separated down the entire front, then he pushed the two sides away from the woman and laid them through the arms of the chair. Putting a hand on her thigh, he squeezed lightly, stroked her leg down to the foot, then stood back to the side of the chair.

A red headed woman now walked on stage from behind the chair. She was very tall and beautiful, Blysse Roberts noted. He thought she looked vaguely familiar, perhaps a famous model or actress. Odd that she would have anything to do with this.

This new woman knelt in front of the one in the chair and began kissing her belly. She worked her way up, kissing the ribcage and then the chest. While she doted on the chest, the long haired man handed her the dagger, which she used to slice the brazier between the bound woman's breasts. With the breasts now exposed, she began to fondle and lick them, cautiously playing with the nipples. Now the bound woman's face did not appear as screwed up in agony but looked mildly apathetic. Moving down, the redhead took the blade to each of the woman's hips and cut her panties. Pulling the loose part away, she returned the dagger to the man and nestled her nose against her captive's crotch. For some time she entertained the woman's sex, both orally and with her hands. As this continued, the bound woman's head tilted back and her chest pushed out, hands clenching the arms of the chair, moans audible.

To their left, a trap door opened on the stage and a long, marble altar rose up from the floor. Arrestingly, a spotlight illuminated it. Loosing the captive woman, now naked except for a thin pair of sandals, the two men and the redhead moved her to the altar. Commanding her down on the altar, they again bound her hands and feet.

Climbing onto the altar, the redhead stood over the woman. She removed her skirt, showing a triangle of trimmed, red pubic hair and no panties. Getting on her knees, she began touching herself above the woman's head, until she was manically thrusting her fingers into herself, glistening from the action. At this point, she lowered her hips so the woman's face was buried between her legs. Grabbing onto the woman's shoulder with one hand, the redhead looked up toward the ceiling and started gyrating her hips.

Lashing a strap through a ring in the side of the altar, the long haired man looped it around the woman's knee and secured it tight; the other man repeated the action on the opposite side. Jerking the woman's sandals off, the long haired man began to undress, then climbed onto the altar once naked, commencing to rub his penis on the woman's crotch until it grew to full erection then forced himself inside her. To this the woman pulled at her bonds, and stifled screams could be heard from underneath the redhead. The other man began fondling and licking the woman's stomach and chest from the far side of the altar.

After reaching a climax, the long haired man exited the woman and climbed down off the altar. Switching places with him, the short haired man stripped down and proceeded to enter the woman. The redhead began lolling her head in ecstasy and scratching the bound woman, drawing blood with her nails.

Blysse Roberts stood up from his seat and left his box. Walking down the aisle, he was met halfway by an usher, who stopped him with a strong hand on his shoulder.

"Please return to your seat until the end of the show, sir," requested the usher.

"I just wanted to get some more cheese," defended Blysse.

"Return to your seat," the usher squeezed harder, "and I will bring more cheese and wine to you, sir."

"Thank you." Blysse retreated and went back to watching the show. The usher appeared with another carafe of wine and a plate of cheese, then quickly slipped away after setting them on Blysse's table.

The woman's screams could now be heard very clearly despite the redhead's position over her. Pouring himself another glass of burgundy, Blysse could overhear a person in a nearby box.

"I love it when they scream," she said to her companion. "Last year I saw a show where the woman screamed the whole time. God, it was exciting!"

Blysse turned his attention back to the stage. The second man was dismounting, then both he and the long haired man gathered their clothing and disappeared into the darkness at the rear of the stage. Following this, a succession of male players came out onto the stage, taking turns violating the woman both coitally and anally.

As this continued, a man dressed in black walked onto the stage, right up to the near edge, and eyed the audience. While he was doing this, the redhead was still grinding her

libido on the woman's face and the men entering her thighs. The man in black looked down, then raised his head and spoke.

"Now, it is time we choose someone from the audience," he spoke in a dialect unfamiliar to Blysse but obviously not American. "Who will it be? Who is that lucky someone that gets to join us on stage? Well, well, well. Let's see, let's see, let's see. Ini mini miny moe, who's our lucky Joe?" He stopped and put his index finger against his lips then pointed into the crowd. "You, Professor Blysse Roberts." The first two men returned to the stage, fully clothed, and joined the man in black. "You're our lucky winner, Professor Roberts. Come on up." The two men began walking toward the professor's box.

Blysse stood up and walked to meet them, caught somewhere between excitement and disgust. He was escorted onto the stage, and the men guided him to the right, away from the altar. Looking over his shoulder, he could see everyone still full in action over there, then he heard the crowd gasp. Turning back, he was seized by the two men, one at each arm, as they brought him to the stage's newest addition. A large disc was illuminated against the wall, and the men pushed him on. Blysse watched as the man in black handed a blindfold to one of the men, who brought it over, covering Blysse's eyes and wrapping it around his head. Once he was blindfolded, the men pushed the disc and set it spinning.

Walking over to the altar, the man in black asked the redhead to stop for a minute, then he lifted the bound woman's head so she could see Blysse spinning. Pulling out another blindfold and some knives, he looked at the woman. She winced.

"No, these aren't for you, young lady, but I will tell you what they are for. I'm going to wear this blindfold and stand over there. Every time you scream, I throw a knife at the man on the wheel. I have seven knives, so the man has two different ways to live. The first is pure luck; if I miss with all seven, he goes free. The other is if you don't make me use enough to get him. Remember, I only throw if you scream." He motioned to the redhead, and she returned to her position on the woman's face. The man in black walked in front of Blysse and faced him. Tying the blindfold on himself, he readied a knife and listened to the players violate the woman.

Blysse closed his eyes, since he couldn't see through the blindfold anyway, and tried to keep from letting the spinning make him nauseous. He could hear the people at the

altar. The redhead was moaning rhythmically and a man was grunting spasmodically. His grunting ceased and was followed by a sigh, then only the redhead's moaning could be heard. A new man climbed on top of the altar, and lifting the woman's buttocks, he thrust himself in her behind. A scream escaped the woman.

A sharp twang struck the spinning wheel, inches from Blysse's chest. His breathing became very rapid.

"Six left," said the man in black.

Blysse listened to the panting and moaning as he spun around. He could hear when the men would change places. Another scream. A knife stuck into the wheel on the other side of Blysse's chest.

"Five left." The wheel kept spinning, the players violating, and another scream. Next to his head.

"Four left." Pushing herself down on the captive woman, the redhead pressed harder, gritting her teeth. A new man climbed onto the altar. Another scream. The other side of his head.

"Three left." Blysse could hear the knife vibrate next to his ear, and he was uncertain whether or not he had just wet his pants. Certainly he would vomit soon. Another scream. Striking the wheel to the right of his neck, the flat edge of the knife touched Blysse's skin.

"Two left." The redhead now stood over the woman again and looked down. Slowly, the woman opened her eyes and looked up, most of her view being directed at the angry red crotch. Spreading her legs a bit wider, the redhead urinated on the woman's face. She screamed. The sixth knife landed opposite the last, touching Blysse's neck.

"One left." Finally, the last man got down off the altar and vanished behind the stage. The redhead stepped down to the floor, and the first two men approached. Dripping with cum, shit, blood, and urine, the bound woman coughed as she gasped for air. The first two men stood at her feet, and the redhead took the dagger and went to the side of the woman.

Plunging the dagger into the woman's stomach, the redhead sawed her way up to the sternum then removed the dagger. She reached inside and fumbled around for a moment, then grabbed hold of something and pulled it out. When it came out, her heart gave one last beat before the redhead took a bite and handed it to the men.

"What a shame," said the man in black, holding up the last knife. "There's still one knife left, and Professor Roberts is unharmed. What shall we do?"

"Throw it!!!" came the unanimous chant from the audience.

"Are you sure?" The crowd responded favorably. "Here we go then." He threw the last knife, and it dove straight into Blysse Roberts' throat. The lights dimmed and the curtain came down. Wild applause erupted from the audience.

Both the woman's body and Blysse Roberts' were taken out to sea and dumped in the Gulf of Mexico. As they drifted in separate directions, a hammerhead shark encountered Blysse's body and took a bite out of the neck. Not finding it agreeable, he let it drift away until finally it washed up on a beach.

There it sits among the pieces of broken shell, bloated and pale. The knife wound is missing with the bite of the shark, leaving only bone and loose flesh connecting the head with the rest of the body. Soaked, the red sweater covers his upper body, the dirty reindeer prancing around, certain to be a distraction for the early morning conch shell collectors.

Walls Never Talk

If these walls could talk...

Talk...

Shout...

Scream...

If they had a voice it would say horrible things. Things none of us wish to hear.

Things best left unsaid.

They might speak the truth.

That would destroy us all.

Speech without a filter. Speech that has no concern for our social status or family connections. Speech as innocent and pure as a child's thoughts. Speech that only repeats what it sees.

These walls are thick. Solid with concrete, stone, and steel. Solid from time. Solid from ears that never connect to vocal chords.

These are walls you trust.

They have seen atrocities.

They have witnessed debauchery.

They have played a role in the most sadistic games known to humankind.

Without a doubt, these walls are more experienced than ten lifetimes of wild copulators.

These walls have memories of the most frightening visions.

These walls are definitely not human.

Not human because they have seen these things and neither spoken nor fled.

They have seen.

They have witnessed.

They have known.

Known everything. Spoken never. Witnessed the wicked.

They have experiences we only whisper about.

Murmurs and hushed conversations in drunken crowds.

Spectators to the basest form of life.

These walls have perceived... love.

Of all the dreadful things anyone, anything, could be witness to, nothing compares to the images of real love. Images that can never be erased. They draw portraits of torture, bondage, twisted forms of macabre positions in the dark.

∞

A high backed, leather chair with stable padding, straight arms, and a formed seat was placed in front of an old fashioned wood burning fireplace. A matching ottoman pressed into a fake fur rug. Two feet rested on the ottoman, at the ends of two lengthy, skinny legs, stretched out from a man with heavy lids over dirty brown eyes. One of his hands held a glass of red Martini, the other a whip with seven frayed ends.

He stared into the fire with a blank expression.

A door behind him opened and a woman wrapped in furs and pearls walked into the room on silver high heels. There were scars on her neck and arms, and a smile on her face. Her stride was composed and confident. Her stomach was bare and her legs were unblemished.

She walked to the man in the chair. She took his whip.

He swallowed the remainder of his drink and stood.

With a light snap she stung the backs of his calves and he moved toward the fireplace.

Her name was Maltrasia. At least that was what he called her.

His name was Geverino. But she called him Bitch.

He walked forward and placed his hands on the carved stone above the fireplace. His naked body stretched out behind him like a criminal preparing to be frisked by a stern police officer. Hairy toes moved in the soft fur of the rug. Fingertips massaged the stone in front of them. And his head bowed to stare at the flames.

Maltrasia stroked her fur and moved behind Geverino. She raised her hand with the whip but put her lips near his left ear.

"Do you wish to tell me the truth yet?" she asked.

"I don't know the difference between the truth and a lie," he answered.

She kissed him below his earlobe.

"Seriously," she said, "if you admit it I won't have to hurt you."

"Seriously," he responded, "my answer would be nothing better than a lie wrapped to suit you."

She rubbed the handle of the whip up and down his back.

"Just say it," she said, "and my touch will be sweet."

"It," he said, "isn't anything my mouth knows. No matter what kind of touch you have it won't change what's inside of me."

"Bitch," she spat and pushed away from him. "I offer you everything and you never give anything back to me." She raised the whip and looked from his neck to his feet. "Do you need this to feel anything at all?" With a snap of her wrist the seven ends of the whip jerked through the air and traced lines across his back.

Geverino winced and his muscles tightened, but he said nothing.

"Say it," said Maltrasia. "Say it once and I won't have to do this ever again." She waited for his response but received none. "You are not Severin and I am not here to heal you of your weak affliction. Just say it and take my softness. This whip will go in the fire and we will be equals."

"Why do you waste your time?" asked Geverino. "You know I am horrible. You know what I am, what I've done, and what I want. I cannot offer you what you deserve except the opportunity to punish me for all the terrible things I have done. All the sins I have committed against you and everyone else with an untainted heart. I will burn in hell long after you have finished with your whip, so at least you can prepare me a little for what I cannot escape in the end. Do this for me and I will be forever grateful."

"Grateful?" she asked. "Grateful for the torture I provide you? Grateful for me playing a role that doesn't suit me? You insist on this punishment but it is a punishment for me, not for you. It makes you feel better for empty sins, for actions that were normal and acceptable. And you feel sanctified. I feel worse. Every time I strike at you part of me dies. Why do you force me to suffer this way?"

"I don't deserve you yet," he said, "but you are here. Maybe I can deserve you after I've paid the price, and your whip can be this price, take back what I've done in your hands. What I didn't know was so bad until I met you."

"This isn't me," she said. "This end of the whip doesn't fit me. Hold me, strangle me, or beat me, but I cannot continue much longer like this."

"It fits you," he said. "No one else could be my punisher. Only you can take my confession. My heart is yours, my body is yours. I have been weak and dirty, but I want to deserve your arms. I want to feel free when I hold you."

Maltrasia stung his butt with the whip.

"You kill me slowly every time I do this," she said. "I can never forgive you for anything you did before we were together. I have no place to judge you then. I can only say what you are, who you are, since we have been with each other, and you have been saintly. A martyr, but otherwise as much as I can ask for. As far as I can see there is no past. There is nothing for me to forgive, nothing for you to repent. Take this whip to me or take me in your arms, but please don't make me suffer through this torture."

"Soon," he said, "maybe soon I will feel I deserve your beauty."

"I don't care what you think you deserve," she said. "Think about me for once. What I want, what I deserve. You make me do this and feel the way you feel. Is that your idea of getting to the level where you deserve me? By bringing my feelings to your level? You are not redeeming yourself with me, you are making me something worse than what I am, what I was. I am already worse because of your self hatred." Maltrasia whipped him across the shoulders. "You think I want this power, but I don't. I don't want it at all. It makes me angry, aggressive. It makes me want to kill you, kill myself. You're nothing but a self-centered, narcissistic, neurotic bastard. I offer you every part of me. My body, my words, my care. All this without punishment. You are not Christ, not even Jesus, and unless you're having me punish you for some other woman in your future it's pointless."

His head straightened and he looked to a small clock with a spinning pendulum on the mantle above the fireplace.

"Is that it?" she asked. "Are you using me as therapy so you can be cleansed for the next woman? Am I just a convenience? Nothing more than a way to test yourself and see if you can be the man you want for the woman you truly desire?"

"No," Geverino countered. "It always feels temporary... always felt temporary... with everyone else. But you... you make me wish I were more pure. I want you, and want you to have a man worth having. Sometimes I want you to have someone else so you can be with someone worthwhile. Someone better than I am. Someone who doesn't have to be ashamed of his memories."

"You don't have to be ashamed of your memories," said Maltrasia. "All you have to do is shut up and take me beside you and speak those little words in my ear."

"I still owe you so much first," he said.

"If you owe me anything it's those words." Maltrasia struck the whip across his back to his legs. "You owe me the chance to feel like a woman who's appreciated. A woman who isn't wasting her time with some man who doesn't realize she's a person."

"You're more than a person," he said. "You are a goddess to me. You embody the perfection I dream about, the state of being that reminds me how degraded my life became before you."

"God," she yelled. "Do you hate me? Don't you know what I need? Don't you hear anything I say to you?"

"I know you want to convince me I don't have to atone for anything," he said, "but I know better. I know you're doing it because you're too sweet to tell me the truth. Somewhere inside you hate what I was and you crave the chance to punish me. When your hand throws the whip some part of you feels it's gotten revenge against what I've done."

"What you've done," she said, "is nothing. You have never done anything against me, aside from binding me to this ridiculous situation." She stepped back from him. She looked at him posed against the fireplace. Her lip twitched and her hand raised. The whip was poised but did not strike. She seemed frozen. A statue of sadistic contemplation. The heels of her shoes dug into the fur beneath her. Her pearls cozied inside the fur over her body.

Only the fire moved.

It swayed and spit. Smiled and smoked. Only the fire was alive in that instant. Fire. It was not ashamed of this situation.

Her hand came down, tiny lines of blood appeared across his back, and she left the room.

He closed his eyes and remained at the fireplace while the blood dripped over his back.

∞

Maltrasia lay awake, her naked front side pressed against the dried wounds on Geverino's back. She touched his hair with her lips. Lightly. Too softly to wake him. Her nipples were erect and her eyes were moist.

Geverino slept quietly, he did not react to Maltrasia's touch. His arms curled around a pillow. Tightly. Feathers poked out of the case. His penis was not fully erect and his breathing was slow.

The night lay more than it moved. It did not caress them, it surrounded them. Stars shone through the window like devil eyes. The night did not offer compassion.

∞

A burgundy Jeep rolled through the mounting snow of a thick, winter storm with a steaming exhaust pipe. Geverino sat behind the steering wheel and switched off the radio. He glanced at the digital clock display. It showed 9:27 am, and he dropped a burning cigarette as he moved his attention back to the road ahead. "Shit," he said as he grabbed the cigarette and brushed out the coal from his sweater. A small hole remained where the cigarette had landed. "Ah, shit." He stuffed the cigarette into the ashtray and slammed it shut.

He focused on the path in front of him and maneuvered through the onslaught of fat snowflakes until he found a place to park. His door was caught by the wind as he stepped out and he had to force it shut against the blowing pressure. With that endeavor overcome, Geverino crossed the street and entered a large shopping mall. He shook the snow from his body, opened his coat, and ascended an escalator.

A clothing store faced him at the top of the escalator and went inside. A sweater was folded neatly alone on a table in front him. He picked it up, felt the material between his fingers, and held it against his body. As he compared its size against his own a man approached him.

"Can I help you with anything, sir?" he asked.

"This sweater feels nice," said Geverino.

"It's cashmere," said the man. "And it's on sale."

"How much?" asked Geverino.

"Twenty-five percent of the marked price," he answered.

"Twenty-five percent off or twenty-five percent of?" asked Geverino.

"Twenty-five percent of," he stated.

"What's wrong with it?" asked Geverino.

"Nothing," he replied, "it's the last one we have."

"Well," said Geverino, "it looks good, and it feels comfortable. And I could use another sweater now. Sure, I'll take it."

"Great. Cash or charge?"

"Cash."

"Would you like a bag?"

"Yes... but do you mind if I wear this one and put my old one in the bag? I burned a hole in it earlier."

"Whatever you prefer," said the man.

Geverino continued through the mall with his bag swinging from one hand. The shops he passed didn't offer anything of interest, so he mounted another escalator and rode it up to the next level. He followed the walkway around to his right and stopped in front of a clock shop. A copious collection of clocks were displayed in the window. Cuckoos in traditional design and modern variations. Wind-up clocks and electric powered clocks. Round, rectangular, and surrealistic. Wooden, metal, and glass. Even clocks that ran backward. But none with a digital display. Geverino switched his bag to his other hand and passed into the store.

A small bell slipped over the top of the door and rang.

A woman, perhaps his own age, perhaps older, possibly even younger, turned around from a wall of clocks and smiled.

"Good morning," said the woman.

"Pretty fair so far," responded Geverino.

"The snow is coming pretty hard," said the woman, "but we have been needing it."

"It's a good reason to appreciate being inside," said Geverino.

"But it's beautiful to watch," said the woman.

"True," said Geverino, "it can be at that."

"Are you interested in finding a clock?" prompted the woman.

"Actually," said Geverino, "I have a question."

"Hopefully about clocks," said the woman.

"You spend a lot of time with clocks?" asked Geverino.

"Most of my time," answered the woman, turned back to the wall and closed the cover of one of the clocks there. "My father made clocks when I grew up. I didn't exactly follow his path, but this is my shop."

"So you think about time much?" asked Geverino and set his bag on the floor.

"Possibly more than some people," said the woman and moved closer to Geverino. "You could say my time is devoted to time."

"Sitting in here," said Geverino, "you find yourself compelled to contemplate the past often?"

"It happens," said the woman.

"Have you come to any conclusions about it?" asked Geverino.

"Conclusions about the past?" grinned the woman. "It's necessary."

"Inescapable?" asked Geverino.

"Inescapable?" The woman pulled an old, worn pocket watch from her vest and rubbed it in her palm. "The past isn't a trap set to capture you. As much as my life is centered around time I don't believe it is anything tangible. Memories always remain, some good, some bad."

"So you don't carry regrets?" asked Geverino. "About things you did, didn't do, said, didn't say?"

"I'm no philosopher or counselor," said the woman.

"Sorry," said Geverino, "I was just curious, you know... because of the clocks."

"It's okay," said the woman and opened the pocket watch. She held it up for Geverino to see. "My father made this when he was young. He spent over a year on it, working at it whenever that perfect inspiration came to him. He told me it was the second greatest achievement of his life. From my experience it has been as accurate as Big Ben."

"What did he say was his greatest achievement?" asked Geverino.

"What do you think?" asked the woman.

"Really, I couldn't imagine," said Geverino.

"Well," said the woman, "I used to watch my father quite a bit when I was little, but I never tried to copy him. I never attempted to make a clock of my own. He would ask if I wanted to make a clock of my own, but I always said no. One day he sat down with me

and pulled out this watch." The woman turned the pocket watch around in her hand. "Obviously I had seen it before. The only time it wasn't on his person was when he slept, bathed, or swam. But I had never examined it, never asked about it."

"And he told you about how he made it?" asked Geverino.

"Yes, he told me his story about making the watch," said the woman, "but that wasn't the reason he sat me down that day. He said he knew I didn't want to become a clock maker like him, and despite how much he would have liked to see me continue his work, he understood. And he asked if I wanted to know why he did it. Why he devoted himself to this craft. Of course I said yes, I wanted to know. It turns out that when he was a young boy there was a wealthy man who owned this elaborate, nine foot tall clock. He said it was the most amazing, most beautiful thing he had ever seen. It's casing was gleaming cherry wood, the face was pearl with the twelve astrological stones denoting each number, all perfectly cut and polished. The hands were carved from ebony, and the pendulum pure gold. My father eventually found the man who had made the clock and talked his way into becoming an apprentice.

"For the first few years," continued the clock shop owner, "all he was allowed to do was clean the master's workshop and watch him work. His initiation passed, and he was finally granted access to the tools. My father devoted all his time to mastering what the old clock maker would teach him, devoted all his concern toward this craft. This watch was made during that time, the old clock maker complimented him impressively on its quality, and my father carried it proudly always. Maybe a year after that he met my mother, they married, another year passed, and my father became a full partner with the old clock maker. His energy continued to be devoted to making clocks and learning every secret he could from the old man. And one day something changed."

"Let me guess," said Geverino.

"If it suits you," said the woman.

"The old clock maker died?" tried Geverino.

"Yes," answered the woman, "but that wasn't the sad part."

"So what was?" asked Geverino.

"The old clock maker's death was what my father had been hoping for for years," said the woman. "He was very proud of the skill he had developed and no longer wanted the second to another master. He wanted to be a solitary master."

"And he got what he wanted," said Geverino.

"He got what he thought he wanted," said the woman. "He attended the funeral with indifference, closed the workshop for a couple days for a show of mourning, then returned to begin his life as an independent expert. However, his return to the workshop didn't carry the feeling of power he expected. The absence of the old clock maker did not provide the sense of freedom he had envisioned, did not allow him the sensation of being a solitary master. My mother found him crying and curled in a ball on the floor of the workshop after he failed to return that night. She looked at him in all of his pity and left him there. He didn't return home for over a week. The workshop remained closed, and my father stayed there alone. He began to hate this pocket watch and everything it stood for, everything he had believed his life was about, and he nearly destroyed it."

"And your mother stopped him?" asked Geverino.

"My mother let him face his own consequences," said the woman. "She gave him the same emotional support he had always given her. He suffered through his grief, eventually cried with his wife, and chose to keep the pocket watch. And he lived the rest of his life as a magnificent clock maker."

"Is this story true?" asked Geverino.

"As true as anything," answered the woman.

"Did he ever tell you what his greatest achievement was?" asked Geverino.

"Yes," replied the woman.

"What was it?" asked Geverino.

"Isn't it clear?" asked the woman with the pocket watch.

∞

Dressed in thick wool clothing, Maltrasia walked in the front door, escaping the cold outside.

Geverino hadn't returned yet.

She went to the study where the fire was dying and added extra logs to it. One was pine and it eventually popped like a firecracker and caused her to jump.

It was still alive.

Maltrasia poured Martini into a large wine glass and sat in the high backed chair. She crossed her legs and stared through the heavy liquor to the flames. They looked obvious. She smiled and sipped from the glass. A long, slow, savoring sip. The smell of burning

wood covered the room, mixed with the scent of her drink, with her perfume. It matched her clothing.

Maltrasia hummed a tune and moved the glass to its beat. She moved in her seat with the rhythm, caressed the glass as a partner, allowed the bubbly tranquility to encompass her.

She left the chair and danced in erotic circles on the rug. The glass danced with her, the drink swirled inside to match her step. As she turned inside the walls she did not observe the paintings on them, did not look to the chair, not to the desk across the room, not to the rug beneath her, not to the ornaments and trinkets scattered everywhere. It was only when she faced the fire that she opened her eyes. It was only to the fire that she looked.

Cold wind and snow blew outside, but it could not touch her here. It could not break through the wool, the Martini, and the fire. It could not bother her in this place.

All it could do was pile outside against the house and the window frame.

∞

Seated in front of a large bay window, Geverino stared through the glass, observing the snow outside.

He drank from a cup of coffee.

Snow covered the streets where misshapen drifts seemed randomly scattered. A sudden burst of wind banged the window and made him jerk upright.

It looked dead.

An old radiator clicked nearby, but the cold reached through the window to where Geverino sat. Behind him a few other people sat at tables conversing, eating lunch, drinking coffee. He did not look to them. He only stared outside. To the snow and the wind. He shivered and gripped his cup tighter. Traffic was scarce.

Two bags were at his feet. One contained his old sweater and the other a gift for Maltrasia.

Geverino reached down to Maltrasia's gift and almost smiled. It was wrapped in shiny paper the color of the snow. He stroked it tenderly, felt the smooth texture. The thin ribbon wrapped around it curled between his fingers, and he played with it the way a distracted schoolgirl plays with her hair. The fingers of his other hand tapped against the side of his cup as he did this.

Occasionally his glance moved to the coffee, but always returned to the snow. The wind pushed against the window, strained against the thin barrier, sought the weakness in its frame. The cold touched Geverino.

His coffee was finished and he took the bags outside.

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Geverino closed out the cold behind him with a click of the firm wood and metal door. He removed his boots, gloves, hat, coat, and scarf. The boots dripped beside the door, the gloves on a small table nearby, hat next to the gloves, coat and scarf in a closet. The bag with his burned sweater was left next to his boots, while the bag with Maltrasia's gift, wet from the snow, was tucked away in the same closet.

When he walked into the study Maltrasia was still dancing in circles on the rug, glass in hand. An empty bottle of Martini was tipped on its side next the chair. Geverino stood silently inside the doorway and watched her dance. She looked so free and happy. Her steps were somewhat hindered from the alcohol, but they remained light. Her face carried a smile and an angle of peace.

Maltrasia did not appear to notice his presence. Her eyes were closed except when she faced the fire.

He began to move toward her but stopped and watched longer. He stared at her face and a sad smile grew on his own.

He inhaled a deep breath and stepped toward her.

"I know who you are," she said.

Geverino stopped. Maltrasia continued dancing. Her eyes only opened when passing the fire. Her expression did not change. Her smile was still blissful. Her steps retained their freedom.

Geverino didn't say anything, didn't move.

Maltrasia didn't stop dancing, didn't speak anything more.

Nothing changed for almost twenty minutes, except the fire. The flames burned high, the wood was low.

Maltrasia's dance ended and she added more wood.

"You should open some wine," she said.

"Perhaps we should make something to eat first," he responded.

"I said you should open some wine."

Geverino left the study and walked down the stairs to the cellar. He turned on a light and looked around his damp surroundings. He made his way past jars of jams, pickled foods, stacks of wood, past everything to a secluded corner that sheltered the racks of wine. He turned on another light in this sheltered area.

Rows of bottles surrounded him on three sides. A collection he had worked at with great pride. Some dated to long before he was born, none had cost him anything near the actual value. They came from all over the world, most were the best examples of their regions. He pulled a stool into this sanctuary and sat amidst his pride, contemplated their dates.

Maltrasia finished her Martini, dropped to the floor, and allowed her glass to roll over to the empty bottle. She curled on the soft fur of the rug and turned to the fire. Her face turned red from its heat. She watched ashes fall below the logs and get caught in the heat draft, spinning some of them in the air above the flames.

Snow continued to pile against the window behind her, pushed thick to the glass by the insistent wind. It refused to relent, commanded the people to seek a warm refuge or die. It insulated them from the world outside, created an excuse for alcohol and close company. The fire knew this weather. Sometimes an enemy. But the walls protected their boundaries, allowed them to appreciate each other. The snow and the wind would not invade the house, would not break the walls. It gave the fire purpose. A reason to exist. Without this weather the heat of the fire was not cherished, not worshipped. The fire loved how this blustery element of nature made it so beloved.

This is why the fire danced.

Maltrasia removed her sweater and folded it beneath her head.

Geverino reached forward, his fingers played near the bottles but did not touch them. He stared at them, turned on the stool, surveyed their history. They were links to the past, his past, the past of others. They were to be drunk in the future, tastes of old efforts, tastes that would not, could not be the same as when they were created.

Geverino withdrew a bottle from one of the shelves. He brushed dust from its label and felt the glass curved smoothly in his palm. He rubbed his finger over the date. It displayed a year much earlier than the one he recognized daily. He rubbed it mildly.

With the bottle in his hand Geverino stood, turned off the light, and left this sanctuary. He put the bottle in a metal sink and ran cold water. As the water poured over the label he scraped at it with his fingernails until it entirely detached from the bottle.

He stopped the water and exited the cellar.

On his way to the study he retrieved the bag with Maltrasia's gift from the closet. The bag was dry and left on the floor. He walked into the study with the bottle of wine in one hand and the gift in his other.

Maltrasia stood in front of the fire with the whip in her right hand. She turned to face him as he came through the door.

"You took too long getting the wine, Bitch," said Maltrasia. "Are you ready to be punished?"

"No," said Geverino and held the wine out to her.

Maltrasia looked at the bottle with no label in his outstretched hand. She reached forward and took it from him. With his now empty hand Geverino removed the whip from Maltrasia's right hand. She went to the desk, slowly, cautiously, as if the wine might be a trap. Geverino waiting as she worked the corkscrew and opened the bottle. She moved for the glasses, but he stopped her.

"Leave it on the desk," he said. "Come over here with me."

Maltrasia moved back to the rug with the same caution she had used with the wine.

Geverino handed Maltrasia her gift and threw the whip into the fireplace.

Maltrasia peeled off the ribbon and wrapping, opened the box inside. From the box she removed a heavy, silver clock with no hands. On its back was an inscription. She read it aloud, "TEMPUS MEUM TUUM, PRAETERITA NON SUNT." My time is yours, there is no past. She looked to Geverino. "Finally you've said it and freed us both."

Timothy's Boat

"Hi, I'm Joe Friday." Actually, his name is Norton Edgar Bernstein. "Have a seat; what can I do for you?"

A beautiful woman with blazing red hair, a perfect hour glass body, and the longest legs a man could ever want to see walks into the rundown office, in the most seductive way. Her tight, black dress is a bit too short for Catholic ethics and a little longer than Norton would like.

She sits down and looks at our Bogart style detective with her all too innocent green eyes. Her pouting lips quiver, as she begins to speak:

"He's been shot! My God, you've got to help me," she says on the verge of tears. "I don't have any other place to turn. The mafia will kill me if they ever get a hold of me."

"Cut! Cut! Cut!" the director bursts in. "How many times do I have to say it? I need to see more emotion. Barbie, this just is not working."

"But, Mr. Statlin," Barbie pleads in a high, whiny voice, pulling off her wig, "I'm doing my best." A long, blonde locke of hair falls down, over her shoulder.

"I need more from you, Barbie." Statlin turns to the rest of the cast and crew, ignoring Barbie. "You can all go on home now; we'll resume shooting tomorrow." Everybody gets their stuff together and leaves the set. Barbie is still following Mr. Statlin around, trying to convince him she can do better, just give her another chance.

Matthew Thompson turns down the invitation from some other cast members to join them at the pub and heads toward the subway station. After a trying day, playing Norton Edgar Bernstein, the Joe Friday of Big City, U.S.A., he just wants to go home, take a long, hot bath, and watch some television.

After buying his ticket, Matthew pushes his way through the overcrowded compartment and finds himself a seat. An old wino is sitting a few feet away, to his left, and when the train starts moving, the wino groggily awakes, vomits, then falls back into a drunken submission.

At the first stop, 23rd Street, Matthew gets off and walks up the stairs to the sidewalk. A man in his mid-thirties is right behind him on the way up. When Matthew gets up to the sidewalk, he stops and takes a breath of air.

"Oh, what a lovely day. The smog has thinned, and we don't need our oxygen masks," he says.

The thirty-some year old man, who was behind him, isn't looking, as he comes up and runs into Matthew.

"Excuse me, sir," Matthew says. "I shouldn't have been standing here."

"Damned right!" the man says, as he picks up his briefcase. "Goddamned bunch of idiots in this city."

Matthew decides that communication with this fellow would be hopeless, so he turns to his left and walks on down the sidewalk.

The man with the briefcase, having fully recovered himself, straightens his coat and walks the other way.

In Washington, a C.I.A. agent gets a quick debriefing by the head of his department.

"Government secrets are leaking out a hell of a lot lately, McMillin. We've got to get a lead on who it might be, so I'm sending you to Cambrio City to check it out."

Back in Cambrio City, Matthew waits for the light to change, so he can cross the street, and the man from the stairway walks up to a magazine stand and buys a paper, as a young boy sits at the same stand, reading a Superman comic. The man pays his quarter then leaves, paper tucked under his arm.

"Hey, mister," the boy says to the newsstand guy, "do you got any new Legion of Heroes in yet?"

"Sure, kid, just got some in today," the guy says, handing the kid a comic book. "That'll be thirty cents."

"Geewiz! I don't have no money; I spent my allowance on candy earlier," the boy replies with a sad look after checking his pockets.

"Tell ya what, kid - you can have the comic. I know you've been waiting for it."

"Gee, thanks!" The boy's face brightens enough to make the newsstand guy wonder if the smog just cleared a little. The boy takes off with the new issue of Legion of Heroes held tightly in his little hands.

Agent Donald Huston watches this with a smile, then continues following the man with the briefcase. After months of tracking, the C.I.A. agent is sure they finally have their man.

Matthew Thompson makes a stop at MacDonald's and gets a couple burgers, which he takes to the park. As he sits on a bench, a man from the F.B.I. jogs up to the drinking fountain and pretends to drink from it, as he eyes Matthew. They've been watching him for weeks and want to be sure they break this case, before the C.I.A. does.

Bradley McMillin's flight comes in an hour later, and he gets off the plane with only a nondescript brown briefcase for luggage. He gets outside and hails a taxi.

"Where can I take ya, buddy?" the taxi driver asks, as he chews on a smelly cigar.

"27th Avenue and Folcum Street," Bradley replies after checking the piece of paper in his pocket.

A woman, well not just a woman, a very beautiful woman, so beautiful, in fact, that your heart would almost stop if you ever saw her, closes the door of Fitness Plus Health Club, a front for S.P.L.A.T., an organization formed to uncover secrets of all the governments in the world. Her long, wavy, brown hair falls naturally over her shoulders in a way that can be expressed as nothing less than perfection of Mother Nature's art. Her body is enough to stop, or start, a war. Her face is the rival of Aphrodite, with two gorgeously mystical brown eyes that flow with an energy of wisdom and excitement. She puts her purse over her shoulder, as she heads down 40th Avenue, toward Folcum Street.

An elderly woman sits down next to Matthew in the park, and they start up a conversation almost immediately.

"Have you seen the fjords lately?" the woman asks.

"Well, actually, I was just thinking about non-reality," Matthew responds.

An F.B.I. bug, which is built into the park bench, transmits their words to an old man, who is apparently taking a nap on the grass.

"You know," says the old woman, "it's a funny thing you mention that, because non-reality is the only non-reality."

"Do you mean that there is only reality?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean," she answers. "Everything and anything is a reality."

"But what about monsters and all that stuff?" Matthew probes.

"That may not be part of your reality, but it is most assuredly part of other people's reality."

"So where does that leave religion?"

"Religion is whatever you believe it is."

"So, what if I believe that God is standing here in front of me?"

"Try it."

Matthew concentrates, believing that God is, in fact, standing in front of him. When he looks up, there is God, all powerful creator of the universe. Curious, Matthew tries another experiment. He believes that God is simply a myth, no more than a fictional character from an old story, and God simply vanishes in a POOF! of reality - at least in Matthew's reality.

The briefcase toting man from the subway, who happens to be named Jimmy DeMelco, goes into the city library and walks downstairs. Eying him nervously, the librarian switches on the closed circuit television cameras. She sighs with relief, as Donald Huston walks in the door thirty seconds later. The C.I.A. is one of the luckier undercover agencies, having agents almost everywhere nowadays.

Looking through a world politics manual, Jimmy speaks into a hidden microphone in his coat sleeve.

"The important thing is," he says, "what I have recently discovered, an unnerving fact has come up, which I have no choice but to accept. The fact is that I am not real. None of

us are. In fact, nothing at all is real. This had originally disturbed me, when that elderly woman in the park happened to mention it, but I am quickly learning to accept it. It is suddenly obvious that the Sign of the Blue Star Rising is the only possible path I can choose."

Donald notes all this with interest, as he listens with the aid of a bionically amplified hearing device the U.S. government was kind enough to install in his brain. The only problem with it is that sometimes, when he's sleeping, it accidentally gets turned up, and the cockroaches sound like incredibly huge monsters that are roving around, ready to devour him in his sleep with their gigantic insect jaws.

Photoplasm is an option that has not been thought of.

A sailboat is docked at a harbor four miles east of Folcum Street and 27th Avenue. It sits placidly, as its two crew members drink vodka out of brandy snifters.

Maltrasia, the lady of fantasia, calmly walks down 40th Avenue, as two Mexicans cruise by in their lowered '57 Chevy, shouting obscene remarks. Not paying attention, they accidentally drive into someone else's reality and fall into a ravine, getting trapped in an ant farm, where they spend the rest of their lives as slaves for a colony of African fire ants.

A slight smile appears on Maltrasia's face, as she continues walking.

Bradley raps twice, then three more times on the oak door at 2734 Folcum Street. The door opens, and he is quickly ushered in. The men in black robes show him to a table, where they supply him with a shot of Bacardi 151 and a glass of pink lemonade. He takes a sip of the lemonade, chases it with the shot, then says:

"Okay, I'm here. Now, where is this contact I'm supposed to meet?"

"Have patience," one of the men in robes responds, "your contact will be along shortly."

"Why is it all you C.I.A. agents are always in such a hurry?" the other robed man asks.

"I guess it's because of our schooling of efficiency," answers Bradley.

The beautiful Maltrasia has made it to Folcum Street and just crossed 37th Avenue. Her heart quickens with the excitement of what is to happen soon.

Matthew suddenly got bored with the old woman's conversation and decided she was stuck in a retirement home. A nursing assistant shrieks, as the old woman suddenly appears in a chair.

The old man on the lawn has been replaced by an Irish Setter, who is now monitoring the park bench.

An eleven year old boy walks up to Matthew and asks, "You wanna buy some dope, man?"

"No," Matthew replies quickly. "Now, go away, before I believe you into a mouse and step on you."

The boy moves on, muttering to himself, "What a weirdo."

Evening is quickly coming, as the sun sinks into the horizon. David Huston, now dressed as a priest, follows Jimmy DeMelco to the park, where Matthew happens to be. Jimmy DeMelco picks a seat, curiously enough, directly across the lake from Matthew.

A male prostitute, in his twenties, soon takes a seat by Jimmy, as the C.I.A. sit observing. They engage in conversation, as

Maltrasia steps up and knocks on the door of 2734 Folcum Street. She is quickly ushered in and introduced to Bradley. Bradley gapes in astonishment, as he looks at the most beautiful woman he has ever seen.

"I love you," he hears his mouth say.

"I know," replies Maltrasia with a grin. "That's why you're coming with me."

"Of course, how could I disagree? Where are we going?"

Maltrasia takes Bradley outside, and they flag a taxi.

"Soultice Docks," Maltrasia says, as she gets in the cab. "No hurry, but I don't want the scenic route either."

In the park, the C.I.A. get their orders to "move in on the suspects." Across the park, a similar order is given to the F.B.I. agents.

The yellow taxi stops at the docks, and Maltrasia and Bradley get out. Maltrasia pays the driver, and the cab pulls away.

"This is the Blinding Ship," Maltrasia tells Bradley. "After we board, we'll sail away, and you will know everything."

They board the ship and go down into the main cabin, joining the other three people, who have been waiting for them.

Tearing away the dog suit, the F.B.I. man jumps up, running over to apprehend Matthew Thompson. Matthew reaches into his coat, and the F.B.I. agent's automatic reaction is to pull his gun and shoot Matthew. Having been taken by surprise, Matthew doesn't have time to disbelieve the bullet, and, therefore, he dies on the spot.

At the same time, David Huston, now dressed as a Tibetan monk on rollerblades, goes for Jimmy DeMelco. Jimmy reaches his hand into his folded newspaper, and David automatically pulls his gun and shoots Jimmy. Jimmy, believing that there is no reality, doesn't acknowledge the existence of the bullet and dies, as he is grievously mistaken, because everything is a reality.

The young homosexual prostitute simultaneously dies of a heart attack. He was scared to death, when he saw a pigeon kiss a cat.

On the Blinding Ship, Maltrasia explains:

"You see, Bradley, we come from a far away planet, whose name it would be useless to tell you, because it is too long and complicated for you to understand. We steal secrets from all the governments of Earth and sell them to rival governments. It's sort of a game we play; it's quite fun actually. This is our highest ranking officer, and top notch spy, Timothy."

"Here are the last of the United States' defense blueprints," Timothy says.

"Thank you, sir," Maltrasia replies.

"It was a job well done, Maltrasia. You took care of your end very well," says the little boy after handing her the Legion of Heroes comic.

The mast folds, and the boat takes off, into the starry sky.

Sketches From Outside

Natasha Nin was not famous.

Nor did she plan to be.

But she always carried a case that contained her sketchpad and pieces of charcoal.

The case was black, generally non-descript, with a lock.

And once a week she brought homemade cookies to the office where she worked.

It was a Tuesday morning and Natasha sat at her desk, her sketches underneath the desk near her feet, and worked on her computer. The top of her desk was amazingly organized. Pictures rested in small frames on the top of it, as well as some on the walls of her cubicle. Despite the lack of space her cubicle provided, she was relaxed and managed her work with a smile.

In other cubicles around her, people dredged through their own work without such lighthearted expressions, easing into the day with strong coffee and tired eyes, unwilling to maintain a genuinely friendly dialogue, unlike Natasha. But that was morning and their attitudes always improved before noon.

Tuesday was not the day Natasha brought her cookies for everyone to enjoy, but she had other surprises this morning. She removed a freshly printed stack of papers from the dutiful printer under her desk and skipped past the other cubicles to an office door. With a light knock she entered. A woman at the desk inside looked up at her entrance.

"Sharon," said Natasha, as she glided over to the desk, "I finished the J and J outline," and laid the papers on the desk.

"I didn't think that would be done until Friday at the earliest," said Sharon.

"Neither did I," answered Natasha, "but it was one of those times when all the information comes together effortlessly."

"Okay, well just leave it here and I'll look at it later," said Sharon.

"What should I do now?" asked Natasha.

"I don't care," said Sharon. "I still have other work to take care of before looking at that outline. Take the rest of the morning off if you want and come see me after lunch."

"Thank you," said Natasha.

"Sure, sure," said Sharon with a wave of her hand, "have fun."

Natasha returned to her desk and opened a newspaper. She ran her finger over a column in the public announcements section, stopped on one of the ads, and proclaimed, "Perfect." Standing, she took her sketch case from beneath her desk and left the building.

The sun was bright outside but the morning still had a chill to it, so Natasha buttoned her coat all the way to the top and purchased a hot coffee from a nearby vendor. She walked along the sidewalk and sipped at her coffee until an open taxi came into view.

The taxi let her off at an extravagant catholic church. She quietly entered the church and made her way up a set of stairs to her right. The stairs opened up to a small room that overlooked the main cathedral chamber. Below her the rows of people dressed in black sat quietly, some weeping, and a casket waited near the altar.

Natasha unlocked her case and removed the large sketchpad. Next she removed a thin box, and from that box she removed a stick of charcoal.

As the mourners below her wept, Natasha transferred the image below her to the paper in front of her. Once finished, her sketch duplicated the scene immaculately, from each individual mourner to the rays of sunshine that reached through the elaborate stained glass windows. The entire sketch was impressively accurate, but the detail of the casket and the young man inside denoted the obvious centerpiece.

After a quick look at her watch, Natasha repacked her case and fled down the stairs. She grabbed a copy of the funeral program on her way out the doors and found another taxi back to work. A small sandwich purchased from the same vendor who had previously supplied her coffee and she was in the elevator listening to the dings of each floor she passed. Her sandwich was finished by the time the elevator doors opened, and she carried the wrapping and dirty napkin past her coworkers to her cubicle and lightly deposited them in the trash.

"Natasha," said Jennifer, walking into the cubicle from down the hall. "Why weren't you at lunch with us? Oh, you missed it... don't tell anyone," she paused with a short look

outside of the cubicle and a finger to her lips, "but we had a couple drinks... oh it was so fun, everyone loosened up, we talked," with a wink, "and you would have liked the talk. I promised not to tell you... you can't say I told you... but it's sooo sweet." Jennifer grinned like a child with a secret. "Everyone talked, you know, the way you talk when you drink. You know I hate to be busy like a Greek mother, but it's so hard not to wonder about these things."

"You're kind of rambling," whispered Natasha. "Maybe we should talk later."

"No, no, no," insisted Jennifer, "nothing to worry about. Anyone who wasn't there is too occupied with their own work to bother with us. But oh, don't distract me with that, this is too fun. You know that sweet guy over there," she said with a jerk of her head backwards, "you know, the kinda dorky one with the short, brown hair... he's kinda sweet and all, cute like a little kitten? Jay, Jay, no... Daniel."

"Are you drunk?" whispered Natasha and glanced around them.

"Just a couple glasses of wine, don't worry about it," answered Jennifer. "He said he likes you. And we all had to promise not to say anything, but isn't it so sweet? Do you think he's cute?"

"Jennifer," said Natasha and pushed her with a hand. "You sound like we're kids in high school still. It's so silly."

"Come on..." pleaded Jennifer, "just tell me. Really, just tell me, I swear I won't tell anyone else."

"Sure, you won't tell anyone," said Natasha.

"Really, I won't," said Jennifer with a dramatic frown.

"Stop it, you bitch," laughed Natasha. "I know I don't have to worry about what you say to him. Do you want to know why I know you won't say anything?"

"Because I'm the most trustworthy, dependable person you know?" asked Jennifer.

"Because I'm not interested," said Natasha.

"Not interested in harmless gossip with me?" asked Jennifer.

"Not interested in Daniel," said Natasha, "and I think everyone usually calls him Danny."

"So you have noticed him," said Jennifer.

"No more than I've noticed you, miss nosy," said Natasha.

"Come on," said Jennifer, "it could be fun. I can set the two of you up and when you fall in love and get married I can say it was all because of me."

"Oh, you're pathetic," said Natasha.

"That hurts," replied Jennifer with feigned pouting and puckered lips.

"I'm happy with my life the way it is," said Natasha, "and I'm not interested in Danny."

"Just come out with all of us, have some drinks, and talk to him," pleaded Jennifer.

"Maybe something will happen, who knows."

"Maybe," said Natasha, "maybe, but you should go back to work now, I need to see Sharon about my J and J outline."

"Work, schmirk. Fine, fine, I'm going back to work, and you go see Sharon, but we will continue this conversation."

"Later," said Natasha. Jennifer turned with a sneer and left the cubicle.

Natasha retraced her earlier footsteps to Sharon's office, lightly knocked on the door, and stuck her head inside. Sharon looked away from her computer to Natasha's head in the doorway, and motioned her inside.

"What can I do for you, Natasha?" asked Sharon.

"The J and J outline," said Natasha. "You told me to come back after lunch."

"Oh, yes. J and J," said Sharon in a less than offhanded manner. "I don't have time to get to that quite yet. Perhaps you could work on something else in the meantime and see me tomorrow."

"I don't actually have any other work to do," said Natasha. "I thought you might have something for me."

"I really don't have time to find another project for you," said Sharon, then continued with an irritated tone, "You weren't supposed to be finished with J and J until Friday. You can't expect me to psychically sense when you'll finish things so early and have something else prepared for you."

"I'm, I'm sorry," Natasha half stuttered. "I didn't mean anything..."

"Are you bringing cookies tomorrow?" asked Sharon.

"Uh, of course," said Natasha. "Every Wednesday."

"Then get out of here," said Sharon kindly. "Go home and relax, bake your cookies, and I'll take care of you in the morning. Just go quietly so everyone doesn't notice."

"Great," said Natasha. "You're wonderful."

"Bye bye now," Sharon waved at Natasha. "My work is far from done, so just get going."

"Okay, bye bye." Natasha quietly closed the door behind her and returned to her desk. She adjusted one of the pictures on her wall, checked the funeral program, pulled her sketch case from under her desk, and slunk out of the building.

The sun now belonged to the afternoon, but the air was still crisp, still chilly, the type of cold winter sings in poetic lyrics. Small snowflakes twinkled in the light of the sun as they drifted loosely down from the sky. Natasha poked her tongue out of her mouth but had little success in capturing the flakes, not as easy as their large, fluffy brethren.

By the time she arrived the cemetery was sprinkled white, the brown of grass and trees an underlying contrast. The funeral procession had not made it this far, so Natasha wandered the grounds, delicately and carefully placing her footsteps. The ground below her feet gave reluctantly, brittle and hard with the first snow. All around the tombstones the air was fresh, as crisp in its scent as the air in its chill. It was lonely and peaceful. She found the site prepared for the casket that was presently en route, then moved to a safe distance under one of the bold oak trees.

Certain the tree gave sufficient protection from the snow, Natasha opened her case and withdrew her tools. She settled her back against the tree and brought the image of the open grave to her page. The obvious trick was showing the white of the snow while only using charcoal to sketch, but apparently practice cannot be overrated, because when Natasha finished her view of the awaiting grave the snow was easily recognizable on the grass, the headstones, the trees, and on the mound of dirt that would signal the completion of the ceremony when it filled in the hole.

Natasha looked up from this sketch to the black cars that coasted along the cemetery road. The cars were clean of snow except for splashes on the fenders and the smallest amounts on the tires. Little escapes of sun reflected off their polished paint. Natasha watched them and uncovered a fresh page.

She laid the sketchpad on her lap and followed the procession with her eyes. It was a meditative time, the time a professional takes for composure before initiating a serious task. It was a reflective time, the time when one remains inactive and allows the beauty of the surroundings to have an effect. It was a time of appreciation, when appreciation of the

current moment, the moment to come, and all the moments past that have caused the present moment. It was a time for Natasha to rest her hands and avoid cramping.

The cars were parked, the casket carried, the mourners followed. Chairs were uncovered from a cloth tarp that blended like a grassy hump in the snow. The casket was placed in front of the hole and the people sat in the now uncovered chairs. Snow fell over their black outfits of mourning like desert dandruff. A priest stood near the coffin and opened a bible.

And Natasha's hand took action against the blank page.

Her work was finished before the priest's, but she remained until the end, the last spectator to leave.

Upon her arrival at home, Natasha disengaged from her cold weather garments at the door, set her sketch case on a chair, and pushed the power button on her stereo. A beer commercial was in mid announcement and she went to the kitchen. She washed her hands, opened the cupboards, and removed ingredients, bowls, and trays. Catchy pop music jumped from her speakers and she twitched her butt in a dance. Twenty minutes later she slid two trays of raw of cookies into the oven and danced away to the shower. Reemerging, wet and wrapped in towels, Natasha removed the first two trays of cookies from the oven and replaced them with two more. She switched from poppy music to graphic news, cotton towels to silken robe, then removed these last two trays of cookies from the oven.

Cookies cooled, news displayed, and a simple dinner was eaten. Natasha did exercises while watching first CNN then a string of sitcoms. She performed daily bedding rituals in the bathroom then carried her sketch case into her bedroom.

The walls and ceiling were scattered with sketches of wakes and burials. The deceased subject in each was a young man. No sketches hung above the head of her bed. Instead there were photographs. The central photograph was of a rough, young man in a tee shirt. Smaller photos surrounded it, all with the same man, some also with a girl.

Natasha found an empty space in front of her bed and tacked her new sketches to the wall.

She dropped her robe on the floor and slid onto the bed.

Natasha looked at her new sketches and masturbated herself to sleep.

Wednesday morning. Clear skies. Bright sun.

Early, again, Natasha carried a plastic container with her cookies into the coffee room at work. She opened a cupboard door and removed some large plates. Gingerly, she placed the cookies, one by one, on the plates then wrapped one cookie in a napkin and walked to her desk. A yellow piece of paper was stuck to the monitor of her computer.

It read, "2:13 - you're mother called - will try again tomorrow (wed) afternoon."

Natasha peeled the note from her monitor and cupped it in her hands. She stared at it and rocked in her seat. She stuck it on the handle of her telephone and leaned back, hands on her mouth. Someone walked in the far door and she sat forward and moved the note from her phone to the trash bin.

Sharon walked up and stood in the entrance of Natasha's cubicle.

"I went through the J and J outline last night," said Sharon, " and it looks great. Check your email. There's a new project set up for you."

"Thanks," said Natasha.

"Are you okay?" asked Sharon. "You don't sound as bouncy as usual."

"Fine," said Natasha. "Probably not enough sleep."

"I didn't image you ever slept," said Sharon with a laugh that sounded unpracticed.

"Did you bring any cookies?"

"Of course," smiled Natasha. "In the coffee room."

"Great. See you later." Midway through turning to leave Sharon looked back and said, "And don't stress yourself with this project. These things don't need to be finished as fast you tend to do them." And she was gone.

Natasha didn't even have time enough to open her email before Jennifer charged into her space.

"Cookies?" asked Jennifer.

"Coffee room," said Natasha

Jennifer disappeared as quickly as she had emerged.

Natasha turned back to the monitor on her desk and opened her mail program. Something bumped her from behind and she turned away from the screen to see Jennifer standing there again with a cookie in each hand. Jennifer held one forward to Natasha.

"No, thank you," said Natasha. "I already have one."

"Cool, I'll take care of both," said Jennifer. "Did you get the note about your mom?"

"Yeah," said Natasha.

"Good, she said she'd call back this afternoon."

"Okay," said Natasha.

"Hump day drinks after work today?" asked Jennifer.

"Sure, why not?" replied Natasha.

"I think Daniel will be there," grinned Jennifer.

"Jennifer, I told you I'm not interested."

"We'll see... we'll see. Alright, well, to work, to work. Thanks for the cookies."

"Sure. See you later."

The morning flashed by with the movement of her computer screen, a mere five gibbering visits from Jennifer, before an hour of cupid's conversation called lunch. Natasha retreated back to the security of her cubicle and protection of her work after lunch, not daring to look away in case Jennifer was waiting with more lovelorn suggestions to improve her life. Some force of luck shielded Natasha from more of these attacks, and her posture slowly eased away from her desk. Just as this pressure evaporated her telephone rang.

"Natasha Nin," she answered.

"Hello, honey," said a woman's voice through the speaker.

Natasha did not speak. Instead, her muscles retightened and she pushed the phone away from her head.

"Natasha, honey, are you there?" asked her mother's little voice in midair. "Natasha, can you hear me? It's your mother. It's Mom."

Natasha inhaled deeply and edged the phone toward her. "Yes, Mom, I hear you."

"Oh, good, I was worried I lost the connection," spoke the little less little voice. "Are you okay? You sound tense. Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, Mom, fine," croaked Natasha then grabbed a bottle of water and squeezed out a mouthful. "I was just lost in my work. Everything's great. How are you?"

"I'm good... well, better actually," said the faltering voice on the line. "Better than before that is. I've been doing a lot of thinking about things. About everything, you know?"

Natasha gave no response.

"It's been so long since we've talked," the tiny speaker in the handset vibrated. "I'm sorry I didn't call before, but I didn't know what to do. I just want to say I don't blame you

anymore. I was jealous and angry, and I shouldn't have been. What happened wasn't your fault... it wasn't your fault he died. And I was so jealous, but I shouldn't have been. You were his daughter, his girl. It's only right that he loved you more." The voice paused with a breath. "I forgive you, Natasha. I didn't know how to deal with it. I was used to being the only woman in his life before you. I thought I would always be the most important one. Everything is good now though. Everything is better. I'm better now. I don't hate you anymore. I want us to be friends."

"Mom?" whispered Natasha.

"Yes, dear?" responded the voice on the phone.

"Please don't call again." Natasha slowly moved the handset back to its cradle and let it slip into place. Just as slowly, she turned in her chair, stood, and calmly walked, without looking at anyone she passed, to the bathroom, where she locked the door, sat on the cold toilet seat, and cried.

She quietly escaped the rest of the day by pretending she was deeply involved in her work, but no more company progress was made at her desk on that Wednesday, that homemade cookie day.

"Ready?" Jennifer jumped into Natasha's cubicle.

Natasha had, by this time, outwardly transformed back to her normal self. No smudged makeup from crying, no stressed frown, no tight posture. Nothing but smiles and happy responses. She turned off her computer, gathered her belongings, linked her arm with Jennifer's, and the two women merrily made their way to Peter Murphy's Bar and Grill to join their coworkers.

Peter Murphy's was the typical afterwork type of bar. Small grill, large bar, big tables, and a lot of people loosening neckties and popping shirt buttons. Sports on the televisions, music on the speakers, beer, wine, and liquor in every hand. Every table was decorated with over poured baskets of peanuts. The wooden floors were immaculately cleaned each day, joyously tarnished each night.

Natasha and Jennifer added their twosome to the other eight well dressed slaves from their office and found their glasses.

"Shout out," hollered Denis and raised his glass.

"Damn Canadians," said Jennifer and raised her glass along with him and the others.

A few rounds later any member of their group randomly elicited a, "Shout out," and the others always whooped in after them.

Jennifer leaned against the opposite side of the table from Natasha and teased Denis by acting dumb and playing with the button on her blouse that would reveal a bit too much of her breasts. She laughed at the jokes he tried to tell while staring at the button that was continually almost undone, and Natasha was tempted to save him the torture by interrupting their conversation, but she merely shook her head with a smile.

"Hey, Natasha," said Danny, his necktie undone and hanging over his shoulder, three buttons open on the front of his shirt, a beer in his hand, and a spot of spilled beer on his stomach. "Whatcha doing?"

"Hi, Danny," said Natasha. "Just watching Jennifer toy with Denis." She motioned with her head.

"Hah," said Danny. "You know, you're a really beautiful woman."

"Oh, Danny," said Natasha, "you're so sweet."

"Yeah?" he grinned.

"Yeah," said Natasha.

Danny stood there grinning for a minute and looking at Natasha, but Natasha was watching Jennifer and Denis.

"Um, okay, well I'll see you later," said Danny.

"Okay," returned Natasha with a smile, then Danny walked away and started talking with another male coworker. Natasha chuckled and moved around the table to Jennifer and Denis.

"How are you two doing?" asked Natasha as she put her right arm around Jennifer's shoulders and her left hand on the hand Jennifer had on her button. When Natasha pulled Jennifer's hand away she slipped the button open, and the blouse opened with it. "Whoops," exclaimed Natasha with a look of humorous surprise.

"Natasha," said Jennifer with a round mouth and an inward breath. "You little bitch," she laughed.

"Looks more comfortable like that," said Denis. "You should leave it."

"Denis," said Jennifer and refastened the button. "Pervert."

"That's just the way they breed us in Canada," defended Denis.

"Nothin' but shoutin' out perverts up there," joined Natasha.

"Let's see how you like it," said Jennifer and reached for the buttons on Natasha's blouse.

"Alright, this could get interesting," said Denis.

"Aw, go away," said Jennifer lightly and pushed him. "Girl talk time."

"Okay," Denis put up his hands. "I'll come back later when it gets good." Denis walked over to Danny and the two other people with him.

"I can't believe you did that," said Jennifer.

"He was going to fall over pretty soon if that button didn't go," said Natasha.

"But I was having fun," pouted Jennifer. "Couldn't you have amused yourself somehow without ruining my game?"

"Well, Danny did come over and talk to me," said Natasha.

"Really?" asked Jennifer. "What did he say?"

"He told me I was beautiful," answered Natasha.

"And what did you say?" asked Jennifer.

"I told him he was sweet," said Natasha.

"And then?" prodded Jennifer.

"And then he ran out of things to say and left," said Natasha.

"Ohhh, you shouldn't have told him was sweet, even if he is a dork," said Jennifer.

"You should have said something nice and talked to him."

"Jennifer, I'm really not interested," said Natasha. "Not in a relationship, definitely not a relationship with someone at work."

"So you're not going to give him another chance to win you over with his poetic craftsmanship?" chided Jennifer.

"Nope," said Natasha.

"How about we share a cab then? I've had my fun, and I don't want Denis thinking he can share a ride with me," said Jennifer.

"Perfect," said Natasha. "I'd like to go home and relax."

Jennifer got out with hugs and kisses, then Natasha continued on, paid the driver, and entered her home with a fatigued sigh. She dropped her coat on the floor just inside the front doorway, discarded her shoes, and entered her bedroom. Barefoot, she stood on her bed and kissed the largest photo, the one with the young man in a tee shirt.

"Daddy," cried Natasha, "I miss you."

∞

"Natasha." Jennifer frantically rushed into Natasha's cubicle Thursday morning and grabbed her by the shoulders. "You really need a phone at home. Maybe it's better that you don't. At least you got to sleep last night."

"What?" asked Natasha, alarmed.

"I hate telling people things like this," said Jennifer.

"What happened? Did something happen to you last night?" asked Natasha.

"Not me, no, Daniel," said Jennifer. Tears fell down her unmade face. "He was killed last night."

"What?" asked Natasha with a jump. "What happened?"

"When everyone left the bar," started Jennifer, "he was drunk, turned back to wave goodnight as he crossed the street, and walked in front of a car. Right in front of everybody."

"Oh my god," said Natasha. "Everyone else saw it? Saw him die?"

"Isn't it horrible? I can't imagine how they must feel," said Jennifer. "How icky. I don't even want to picture it. Let's get out here. Sharon called everyone when she heard and told us not to come in today. Come on, let's go."

Their office stayed empty for the remainder of Thursday, Friday passed with a nervously hushed and heavy attitude, Saturday and Sunday away from work and coworkers.

∞

Monday morning did not bring work. Instead it brought Danny's funeral.

Natasha found her best black dress and shoes, meticulously applied her makeup, wrapped herself in a warm, black coat, and picked up her sketch case.

When she arrived at the church Jennifer was in the reception room drinking coffee with most of the other people from their office and others from outside the office. Natasha put her coat and case in the cloakroom and joined her friend.

"I can't believe it," was among the general conversation in the room, repeated in every group of people, along with phrases of, "He was still so young. It's just horrible. Life can be so unfair. He was such a nice, sweet guy. Can you believe they had to watch it happen?"

The time came and everyone wandered into the main hall for the service and viewing. Danny's priest, apparently the same priest who had baptized him and given mass and confession to him every week until the past Wednesday night elicited a forty five minute summary of his life with Danny and seemed to remember every good deed Danny had ever committed. Natasha snuck out to her sketch case during this biography.

She found a discreet spot with a good view of the casket and filled a page from her sketchpad. This church wasn't as glorious as the one from Tuesday's expedition, but the smaller stained glass windows here still allowed the sun to sanctify the picture.

Finished, Natasha returned her case to the cloakroom, washed her hands, and slid back onto the pew next to Jennifer. The priest continued his oration for the following fifteen minutes. A few other people spoke some kind words, then the viewing.

Natasha and Jennifer rode in the backseat of someone's car while no one talked, no music played, and Natasha stared out her window. Eyes closed, Natasha listened to the priest give his eulogy at the grave site, not daring to sneak off for another sketch, said something soft like everyone else, and watched them lower the casket and throw the first shovelful of dirt.

Jennifer led her back to the car, and Natasha moved through the reception clutching her sketch case until good manners allowed everyone to withdraw to their own homes.

Upon her arrival home Natasha immediately exchanged the dress of mourning for her robe, used the bathroom, and brought her case into her bedroom. She set the case on the floor, placed three thick telephone directories on top of her bed, and stepped up onto them.

Natasha delicately placed the sketch of Danny on the ceiling above her bed, pushed the directories to the ground with her left foot, dropped her robe, settled back on the bed, spread her legs, and cooed, "Now you can have me, Danny."

Ahdam and Eefe

One tiny speck started spinning through the universe, taking on form as it went. The days were long, and changes felt slow as it continued wafting through space. Planets passed on the right and left, solar systems passed, galaxies, until after two billion years, this speck had its form and found itself on a planet many million or billion times its original size. This particle was now a new form of life, not the only one on the planet, but the first and somewhat only one of its kind. A new being had come into existence, and she had grown along the way, becoming Lila.

Lila observed her new home and form, and she seemed pleased. Happily, she also regarded the growth that had occurred in what was now her womb. It would not be long before there was another of her kind. For the time being, Lila adapted herself to her environment and built what she would refer to as a home.

Soon after settling, the growth in Lila separated itself from her and began to grow, becoming a full sized creature like Lila, but in male form. To this new life, Lila gave the name Ahdam. Not long after Ahdam became a full sized creature, another life form began to grow inside Lila.

For the second time, a new life separated from Lila, this one a female. Eefe became the name of the female child, and Lila was pleased with the lives that had grown out of her, and Ahdam loved Lila and he loved Eefe without restrictions.

As Eefe grew older, Ahdam saw her beauty and brilliance more and more. His love for her grew beyond his love for Lila, and he no longer wanted to share his love for Eefe with Lila, so he took Eefe away to a distant forest, where she grew up knowing and loving only him.

Ahdam told Eefe how she had been made just for him, her body one with his, coming from him. Eefe loved Ahdam and thought that Lila was a bad person who had originally been made for him then taken away because she was not good.

Eefe blossomed into a grown being and began wondering about things. She wanted to know more about the world and how it worked and from where they came. Ahdam told her that a man named Ghad had created everything, including her, whom He made from Ahdam.

He warned her that they could freely roam the area and enjoy it and she should consume cottonseed oil often and avoid yohimbine, because yohimbine would destroy their blissful freedom. Because Eefe loved Ahdam as she did, she believed what he told her, and she lived gaily in their wonderful forest.

Since they knew no society of beings like themselves, Ahdam and Eefe would commune with the animals, relating to them as they might with others of their own kind, if there were others. Eefe wished there were others and she asked Ahdam about it.

"I want other people to talk to, Ahdam," she said one day after returning from a walk.

"But we have all Ghad's creatures to keep us company, besides, there aren't any others like us," Ahdam replied.

"What about Lila?"

"I told you, Ghad took her away because she was evil."

"Can't Ghad give us more people for company?"

"We are His perfect creation. As long as we live here and accept His simple rules, our lives will be flawless."

"I still think there should be others," said Eefe.

"There isn't any need for that as long as we love each other the way we do."

Eefe did love Ahdam as much as she ever had, but her life wasn't flawless. She couldn't understand why he thought it was such a bad idea to have other people. Contemplating this, she went on with her normal, daily activities, walking through the woods and talking with the animals.

One day, she came across a dove, and they began talking. While they talked, Eefe began to think again about having others of her kind around.

"There are many doves around here," Eefe said.

"Oh yes," said the dove. "I couldn't even tell you how many."

"Do you think it's better to have so many doves, or would it be better if there were only two of you?"

"It is most certainly better to have many. There's family and friends. No, it wouldn't be natural to have only two."

"That's how I feel, but there are only two people. I don't understand it - I do everything that Ghad says should be done, and I still don't feel complete. I consume the cottonseed oil daily and avoid the yohimbine," said Eefe.

"Who is this Ghad," asked the dove, "and when did it tell you these things?"

"Ghad is the Creator... and He didn't tell me, He told Ahdam, and Ahdam told me."

"It sounds unnatural to me," said the dove. "It seems to me you have it all backward. You should be using the yohimbine and avoiding the cottonseed oil."

"You don't think it's wrong?" asked Eefe.

"It's natural. There isn't anything wrong with having others of your kind to associate with."

Eefe thanked the dove and went away. Starting then, she avoided cottonseed oil and began putting yohimbine powder in her and Ahdam's meals. It wasn't long after she began doing this when she noticed that she was growing. She said something to Ahdam about it, but he told her it was her imagination. But she continued to grow until a new life separated itself from her. Eefe was so overjoyed and astonished that she couldn't believe it. When this new life came out, Ahdam was furious.

"You stopped consuming the cottonseed oil!"

"But it seemed wrong that we were the only two people," retorted Eefe. "I didn't feel complete before, and now I do."

"Now we will have to share our love with others, and this child will just be the first of many that will come into existence, and it will be impossible to live so peacefully here in the end."

"It will create more love, Ahdam, and how much can our lives be worth if we can't share them with others?"

After that child, there was another and another and many more. From all those children came other children, until, as Ahdam had speculated, they could no longer live the same lives they had in the forest. Cities sprouted up, and Ahdam and Eefe's offspring began populating the whole planet, resulting in a large variety of cultures and societies.

Lila traveled around the world, visiting all the lives that had come about resulting from Eefe's reluctance to continue following Ahdam's rules, and she was happy. Knowing that her purpose here was complete, Lila lay down to rest, and her body dissolved into dust. A strong wind came down from the skies and blew her dusty remains into space, where they scattered in all directions, spinning throughout the universe.

placid religion

There's a tiger in the corridor of a monastery. Calmly, the monks walk past him everyday, patting his head as they pass. One monk is assigned the task of feeding the tiger. It's a miracle. Joseph is the tiger's name, given him by the monk who feeds him. His large eyes watch the monks pass by in quiet contemplation, another afternoon goes by, same as the last, no one flinching at the sight of the tiger, as he has been there for a truly long time.

One special day, indeed this is a special day, Brother Philip, the monk who feeds Joseph, is requested to take him on a journey. Brother Philip, being the respectable monk he is, takes Joseph out into the rainy night, both pretending not to notice the foul weather. Sticking one large paw into the muddy earth after another, Joseph walks silently beside the quiet monk.

"How do you feel, Joseph," Brother Philip says then is silent again, because these are the first words he's spoken since his vow of silence ended, and it feels strange to talk.

The tiger looks up at the monk then turns his head back to the soaking ground.

A bolt of lightning shows that they have a long way to go before they will have shelter from the rain. Brother Philip reaches down and touches Joseph's head. It's wet and his fur feels thinner than it did in the corridor. He's amazed that the tiger doesn't seem to mind walking after sitting in that corridor for so long.

A small village becomes visible in the distance, accented by dim firelight. Soon, they will be able to stop for a rest and sit out of the rain. Fifty miles must have passed already with the tiny droplets of water falling on their heads and backs and mud sucking up around their feet. They won't stay long, but it will be nice for both Joseph and Brother Philip to shake out the water and sit.

The monk turns his head to speak again to the tiger but changes his mind and looks toward the village. Joseph hasn't done anything except walk placidly by Brother Philip's side. They continue.

Five miles further, they have reached the village and are looking for a place to seek a moment's shelter. Torchlight shines out from a small inlet, and Brother Philip and Joseph pull their wet bodies out of the rain.

Joseph shakes himself, trying to get comfortable enough to lie down, and Brother Philip feeds him a small piece of cabbage. The tiger would probably prefer a chunk of raw meat, but he has gotten used to having mostly vegetables while living with the monks. He quickly chews it and looks up to the monk to see what he's going to do.

Brother Philip puts his hand on Joseph's back and gently scratches the white and black fur. Joseph turns his head to the side and closes his eyes, purring, as the monk's fingers tickle his spine.

A sound comes from behind them, and both Brother Philip and Joseph look to see what it is. A small man in a torn, brown robe steps in the doorway and yells at them to leave his alcove and get out of the village and not to come back again. The villagers don't want their type there. Joseph rumbles a low growl, causing the man to step back inside the doorway, leaving only half of his face showing, then Brother Philip motions to Joseph and they walk back into the rain.

Neither is happy to be out in the weather again, but both have patience and calmly walk on.

When the village lights begin to grow dim behind them, they encounter a small boy, not more than twelve years old, walking alone in the night.

"Hello," says the monk then is quiet as he has forgotten what it is like talking with someone else.

The boy nervously looks at the monk and tiger then whispers his reply.

"Hello." The boy joins them, and all continue to walk through the night. "What are you doing out here?" the boy finally asks.

Startled, the monk looks over to the boy and delays his answer.

"We are walking," say Brother Philip.

"Where are you going?" asks the boy.

"Ahead," answers the monk.

"Ahead? What's your destination?"

"We'll know when we reach it," says the monk. The tiger gives the boy a short glance with his saturated head.

"Do you mind my walking with you?" asks the boy.

"What are you doing out here in the rain?" asks the monk.

"I'm an outcast from the village back there. I shamed my family."

"How did you do that?"

"I abandoned my chores to help a wounded stranger," says the boy.

"Why should that shame your family?"

"Strangers are not welcomed in our village. My people never allow them to stay."

"So we noticed. It is a very unhealthy way to prove your love to God."

"We don't have a god. My people despise the monks that live on the other side of the village."

"I am one of those monks."

"I know," says the boy.

Brother Philip, Joseph, and the boy walk on in silence, each looking down at the puddles on the ground. Nearing early morning, they reach some small hills and the monk finds a spacious cave for them to get some rest.

Picking some of the waist-high grass from outside the mouth of the cave, Brother Philip fashions himself a wet pillow and lays his weary head upon it. Soon, he is sound asleep and does not notice that the rain has let up some. Joseph stretches a long paw out, patting the floor of the cave, and spreads himself out near the monk. The boy watches the tiger then sits down and stares out of the cave.

After some time, the rain picks up again, and the boy walks outside. Joseph watches the boy leave with his dark, silent eyes.

With the few remaining soft white clouds being driven out of the sky by the late morning sun, Brother Philip awakes and scratches his head. He stretches the stiffness out of his back and takes some vegetables from his bag for breakfast.

After eating some rice and carrots, the monk puts some food in front of the tiger. Joseph slowly pushes it to the side with his feline mouth.

"Where did the boy go?" asks the monk, returning the tiger's rations to the bag. "He seemed a delicious sort."

The tiger licks at one of his paws and follows the monk out of the cave and down the hill.

Larries Hell

If I were a squirrel, it would be more than a quarter to seven when I ran through the woods to Grandmother's house by the lake where she hung her nylons in the breeze hoping to attract some wandering Larries that were in search of cellulite for their birthday. Can't catch the reaper when he jousts a Larry-Bob but Grandma will always trap the Larries in her fifty year old pantyhose that haven't been washed since 1957 Memorial Day. He ran with as much speed as he could muster (which wasn't much because of the spare car tire someone had strapped to his waist, but it was somewhat quick considering that deficit) to escape the reaper who was close on his tail.

As he rounded the corner, his nostrils flared with the distasteful odor of formaldehyde and mothballs, then SMACK! he was hit in the face with one of Grandma's nylons. Caught in the trap, he was safe from the reaper because the reaper was afraid of Grandma's hose, but he now could not escape Grandma's rice pudding, an old Swedish favorite. Larry struggled and struggled, but then he stopped as he heard the sound of voices somewhere near. Listening, he was able to make out that the voices were coming from under the house. Not only were they voices, but they were screaming, moaning, wailing tortured voices of the Larries that Grandma had caught before him. "Oh no," he said, "she's got me but good. How will I ever get out?"

Hopeless, Larry stopped struggling and gave into the fact that he was stuck there, breathing through Grandma's hose with a tingly aroma seeping into his nostrils and down his throat. Before long, Larry heard somebody coming around the side of the house. As he listened, he realized it was the maid and the gardener, but they left after all their rocks were gotten off, and he returned to silent waiting. Grandma soon came after the maid and gardener had finished (not in the same manner you pervert) and took the poor Larry by

the nylon covered head and brought him into the house. Once in the house, she led Larry down a couple of halls, then opened the forbidden door.

Peering into the doorway, Larry could see nothing but darkness, yet he could hear the voices below and it gave him a stomach wrenching feeling. Grandma pushed Larry down the stair and into the mass of bodies.

Looking around, Larry saw that he was in his eternal tomb. He was stuck in a room that consisted of nothing but Larries upon Larries upon Larries.

Pink Daises

Sometimes I can't help it, the desire oozes throughout my body, reaching every minuscule particle in its path, reaching every limb, every follicle, every pore, every cell, even my testicles, growing like the bubble that surrounds you when you realize you've taken too much acid, not knowing whether the world is floating around you or if you're floating around it, barely scratching at nuclear missile proof glass that protects it from you or you from it but never quite certain until somebody taps you on the shoulder and says, "Hey, got a cigarette?" and everything zooms in close, fast like a TV camera and you realize where you've been and that you're back, even if it is someplace new, you're back, and there's an intense sensation running through your body and mind with the realization. That's what always gets me.

Before, as in before I realized that I might as well be God, because it sure the hell didn't look like anyone else was doing it, or perhaps it's Satan, I can't quite tell the difference since they either completely disagree or completely agree, and one is omnipotent and created the other and controls everything, so he could change what the other thinks, yet they still disagree, so it must be Satan and God are the same only it's Satan because he's the side that would think it's funny, I used to fight it, hate it and hate myself. It all seemed such a waste and how could anybody be like that when so much needed to be done to fix the world, rally the whales, build white picket fences, shave the dog, and eat the wife until she finally came and said your tongue was better than the heroin she had in Turkey when she was twenty-three and you were almost as good as another woman, but you didn't have a cunt. I felt evil.

Monthly statements continued to arrive for the Audi, and sometimes I did freelance work so my wife could get a new Range Rover every year, but it was alright, because

every Christmas and on each of our birthdays we shared a beautiful young prostitute or sometimes an old coed friend who was in town and never could be on enough ecstasy around the two of us to keep her from lusting after my wife, if she wasn't as interested in me, but somehow we always seemed to arouse some perky female, and sometimes a perky male, but I'm not into that no matter how much she always wanted to see me suck cock, when we were together and fully charged with sexual energy that would later fill a lighthouse reserve bank. On occasion, I thought we were a perfectly normal American couple.

Everything continuing as normal was probably what bothered me the most, since I couldn't understand how I could go on the way I did and nothing bad ever came out of it, but when I would worry and pace back and forth as if I were the newest addition to the penitentiary and all eyes were on my virgin ass so if I stopped it was me or them, moaning and talking to myself, my wife soothed me with her soft voice, and we would take a vacation, just the two of us, always managing an orgasm for one or the other during the transportation, especially on a plane, because we flew first class and it was so funny to watch the stewardesses who knew what was going on, and sometimes one would proposition us for later, but fuck her, this was our time alone, and I felt better and knew she was right, and what could be wrong when we had everything we wanted and were in love and both understood literature, even though we comprehended everything that happened during the drug scenes in movies, and our I.Q.'s weren't the only thing that let us know the straights were talking baboons when they said drugs killed brain cells. Most of the world's geniuses used drugs of some sort or another, and the only problem is sometimes they can make a person insane. But that's all a matter of perspective anyway.

"I love you," I would say.

"I fuck you," she would return.

"Fuck you."

"Love you forever." We understood each other and were perfect together. Hell, we were each other. Some days I can't even tell which one of us I am anymore, except when I realize I only check out the women who walk by, and she would be looking at both genders. Probably makes the world look more beautiful.

It wasn't our love that eventually made everything okay as it always seems to do in fiction, but it was self-realization. Over some course of time, to this day I haven't figured

out exactly how long or when, but it happened nonetheless and I got better and understood myself and the world, everything became clear to me, just as the business specifics had done in the beginning, only this was more like an olfactory hallucination than a visual because that's when you realize how intense everything is, and the world becomes more real and at the same time a surrealistic game, but I'm not talking about drugs, because they were never this potent no matter how much I took, and until you reach this point, you can't understand how trivial they are, and if I had gotten here when I was younger I wouldn't have ever taken them because it would have been going backwards. I've seen some people who have never even smoked a tobacco cigarette reach this sort of illumination and they began to create the most fabulous inventions and surmise the ultimate of theories, then they simply disappeared. I'm not sure what happened to them, if it's a conspiracy to keep these people out of civilization, or if they couldn't stand being around normal people and live together in some secret society on an island they've hidden from cameras and radar alike, or if they each built a spaceship and flew to another planet, a planet of gods, so they all drink wine with Zeus and laugh at earth even though they were once like everyone else. That's the state I've reached, but I like it here with my wife, because part of it was when I realized how one person never knows anything about sex, and we are always learning more from another, and it's sex that triggers the endorphins in our brains the best so that we can advance into a god-like state, but never alone because no matter how good it feels, it's just coming and you can't learn enough that way, so a partner's best.

"No person can ever have positive proof the moon exists," I remember my wife once saying.

"Well, nobody can ever be sure what is reality and what isn't," I responded, not considerably sure what to say, but that seemed to be the right thing because I could see the green of her irises change and that night we had sex four times, and the next morning we figured out each other's names and were married within a month.

I'm still not sure if that was real or just a byproduct of something we were smoking.

At that time I was new to the business, and they seemed to like me although I wasn't sure why, but one day the boss said, "You know how to think in the chaos and it makes sense to you." It took me four years to figure that sentence out, but when I did I recognized he was wrong, because I hadn't reached that level yet, but I felt good that he

thought I had. One of the first things I learned in the business was that you have to own a company, because if you don't, like I didn't at first, the I.R.S. man comes breathing bloody sweat in your face and if you've never felt poor you will after paying his bribe fee. That's when I opened import/export stores, which was actually my wife's idea, on account of that way when we wanted something good in the States we could get it directly from the source. Plus it gave us good reason to travel a lot.

"Have you ever thought that maybe you have to be in charge of humanity?" I asked my wife one day, because she was the most intelligent person I knew besides these two other people who were hard as hell to get a hold of, if not impossible, since they were always in some secluded place on the planet or just learning, or in a state of being convinced that either telephones weren't real or people weren't real, or one or the other or both didn't matter.

"Of course, but I'm having too much fun to concern myself with humanity, so I thought you would take care of the world."

"It wasn't until recently that I realized I was supposed to be God."

"Well, it's about fucking time. I thought you knew back in college, that's why I was finally able to relax."

"What do I do now?"

"How should I know? Once I found out it was your destiny and not mine, I stopped worrying about it, but you had better keep on the ball because I love being your wife too much and playing with the rest of humankind to see it all fall apart now." That was when I understood what the boss was saying, but I'm not sure he understood, seeing as how he thought I understood when I didn't, and he only comprehended a minor disarray and not the real thing, so he never saw a slice of the whole picture which was now being broadcast to me on a direct link satellite dish and high definition walk into the picture and shake hands with John Wayne screen made on Venus, used in Atlantis, built the pyramids reality hallucination viewing system.

I was God, god of chaos, chaos being everything, everything being visible to me, me being invisible to the world, the world being in chaos throughout every tiny bit and my being able to understand what other people don't even conceive is there to be understood, so I have to be the god of chaos, chaos being everything; I have to be the god of everything and walk through the disarray and put things in order where they've

fallen askew, and that's why what I do is okay, and even when they thought I was becoming a bit too dangerous, I was right and they were wrong even though they got me started.

"Why don't you take a vacation for a while," the boss mumbled to me one day in his authoritarian style that had the others running in fear. "You haven't been out of the States for over a year, except on business."

"I'll go when I feel like it. Lately, I've begun to truly understand the chaos, and I've come to the conclusion that you don't understand it one bit." I could see this switch in the conversation had thrown him off, as he sat silently, mouth jerking open and closed like a puppet, so I continued. "It's now mine, because I'm the only one who can see it—not you, or your priest, or the President, or the Pope, or the Satanists, or the Buddhists, or the Jews, teachers, leaders, whores, pimps, junkies, philosophers—no, none of you can see it; therefore, you can't understand it, but I can, and I'm the only one. That's why I do my job, because I'm the only one who can walk through and replace the items that have fallen off the shelves. Don't you see? My job and I are the most important elements in existence. Regardless of whether you're a nigger, spic, Jew, cracker, wetback, wop, flathead, camel jockey, canuck, or whatever, you're all the same, and you can't see what I see. I am life, and I am the one in charge of who gets it and who doesn't."

"You're awfully close to getting on my red list, dammit!" The words were cast with tainted strength, and I could see he knew I was right, or he just didn't recognize the fact, due to his not being able to reach my level.

"I'm going home now," I told him. "If you have anything for me, let me know." He didn't say anything, but I could hear his thoughts running along the axons in his mind, because, after all, I was the only, or at least one of the only ones, including my wife, who understood what was really going on in the world, so everything was visible to me.

The next morning I received a telegram saying, "No more assignments coming. After careful consideration, we've decided your skills are no longer necessary for our company, or at least the work performed by you. The Management." Being no novice, I knew what this telegram meant, so seemingly impersonal pink slip that sounded as if I had been working in a bank, sweating under fluorescent lighting as if my work was only bringing a deficit to my company, but this wasn't a pink slip of that sort, because The Management

doesn't say go your way and we'll give you references, oh no, not these people, what a pink slip from them means is click, bang, you're dead.

"Read this telegram, honey," I said to my wife after finishing it. "I've been relieved of duty, so make sure you don't let them trick you out of the chaos to where they have power. They can't fuck with you in there."

"Why don't you lose some of them in it so they'll know they can't?"

"That's exactly what I'm going to do, because I can walk through and pull the pieces down, and they won't even be able to see me, since they don't realize I'm god, the God, or Satan, but which ever it's light bearer and I am the only one that's in charge of all this."

"Do you want cream cheese on your bagel?" After my "yes," we finished breakfast before she went to check on a couple of the stores, and I stopped off to get cigarettes on the way to see the boss. The bomb boys didn't go for the cars, so I saw them coming before they ever knew I was there, because I am everything, and two bodies were left leaning against the side of the Union 76 station. Nobody noticed.

After getting cigarettes, which always tasted better during a job, especially after one or more scores, I went to see the boss. When I got there, never realizing how far they were blinded, I walked straight to his office, touching no one, being stopped by no one; it almost surprised even me.

Two of his big boys reached toward me as they sprang out of their chairs like broken jack-in-the-boxes scared by my sudden entrance, but their hands passed right through me, and I laid them out fast, because they were so far from understanding it wasn't worth letting them glimpse what could be, and they both lolled back against their chairs, drops of black blood seeping from their organizational orifices. The boss slowly turned toward me and squeezed one shot from his .357 magnum, but I took it out of his hand as the bullet struck the chair behind me, since he was worth a brief conversation.

"Perhaps I underestimated you," his bloated words strained through the sweat-grimed lips. "Never thought you'd make it here, although I figured you were crazy enough to try."

"You underestimated the chaos," I enlightened him. "Now, I am that power which drives the light and the night and everything which must be. Nothing can touch me on this plane—I am all that will be, the rider of the horse of destruction and salvation. Once upon a time you almost told me so yourself, but you didn't understand, and now I am that

chaos. I live in it, breathe in it, sustain myself in it. Untouchable as you have only thought you might be. I had hopes for you, since at least you seemed to know it was there, but that hope was empty."

"As I was saying," pink cheeks cleanly shaven showing drops of perspiration, "was that your release is being revoked. There isn't anyone who can replace you, and I'm sure of that now. You are the best, and we need you on our team."

Amusingly funny. Practically hilarious. I almost went into hysterics, but sufficed with a chuckle.

"Your silly words don't matter to me anymore. I'm not returning to my position with you, I'm above you. No, I'm here to relieve you of the stress you've had to deal with for so long. This time, you're getting the pink slip."

"Don't be a fool. There's over a hundred armed men in this building waiting to make you a human colander. Even if you kill me, you'll be dead two steps outside those doors."

This rhetoric was tiring, and I realized he was of no hope, and his babble bored me just as my Shakespeare professor, Riley I believe, did with his non-stop ranting and so I had to stop going to class, but this wasn't class, because all knowledge was with me and he wouldn't learn, so before I started scratching my chin, glancing away and saying, "Uh huh. Yes. Oh. Go on," and all that I'm paying attention to every word and interested as hell shit I stopped him.

"No one can kill me." Even when the barrel of the 9 mm fell against his forehead, I believe he thought he had power, but I tucked three quick shots into his skull and turned and walked out those doors.

If anyone was out there to get me, I didn't see them, or perhaps I just didn't look, because they couldn't touch me, so I didn't care. They might be useful in the future. I left a note on the secretary's desk naming a replacement for the boss, then went to catch up with my wife in time for lunch.

I still work for the company, when I want, and on occasional nice days play golf with my neighbors at our exclusive, Rolls Royce golf cart private club, trading business jokes, secrets on how to cut income taxes and declare yachts as business expenses. The whole world is blind, even those neighbors think my import/export business is the only thing I do, and when my wife and I are over for dinner, playing with their children, laughing, mourning the murder of another neighbor, they don't realize one of them is next.

Crusaders

"Keep on walking."

"But this road goes nowhere. Besides, what's the point now?"

"Everything is the point now. What makes you think anything has changed?"

"What about Carol?"

"Never was of consequence... only thing that matters is if we get there in time."

"I'm telling you this road goes nowhere."

"It sure as hell does go somewhere, and that's where we're going."

"Alright, alright." Swinging her machete, Sarah hacked at the foliage covering the road in front of them.

"You do know we're the last crusaders against evil, don't you?"

"Yeah, yeah, God's dead and everyone who gives a shit died with him. I'm still not sure if I care."

"This isn't about somebody's god, it's about good and evil. The planet's turned sour, and we have to make it there before it's too late."

"Shut up already, will you? I know we have to make it there, and I know we can't give up. Have I shown any signs of slowing down?"

"No. You just don't always seem convinced how necessary this is..."

"Well, there are no absolutes," she sprawled, cutting a vine, "but don't worry about my devotion to the cause."

"Never have worried about it, now or ever. My duty in part is to be a guide, one who knows the road to where we're going, and one who is a constant reminder of our crusade. A crusade, mind you, that is more real than kill or convert in the name of the king. We have been selected to cleanse, to purge, to sanctify, but not to go on parade for gold and call it a holy quest."

"Gold is in the mind."

"Nothing more truly said, but for most, gold is in the hand, and when you feel that way you can't see what's right anymore."

"Oh, yes, but we see all too clearly, don't we?"

"Sometimes painfully clear, like looking directly at the sun on a cloudless day. Warm and wonderful, until you see too much."

"My feelings exactly." Continuing to cut, Sarah didn't look at Thomas as they talked. Clumps of her long, black hair fell into her face as she attempted to wipe the sweat away, concentrating on the brush and vines.

"When the world starts falling apart, heroes are needed. Back in the time of ancient Rome is when this should have been done, but technology was so undeveloped it couldn't work... but now we have the means. Heck, media coverage is instantaneous, everybody is linked into some computer or another, travel is easier than taking a walk to the nearest store, and all of this has set up the channel to make us those heroes."

"I never thought of us as being heroes—just people performing a necessary job in the evolution of our world, something that must happen. Carol didn't think that way, but if we are successful, at least I'll know she wasn't lost for nothing."

"Even if we fail, which could only happen if we don't make it in time, we will still be heroes, or at least martyrs. Including Carol and every other person who risked themselves to get us here."

"I don't even want to be a hero, or a martyr; I simply want to do what's right."

"The world hasn't seen many tasks more right than ours. I would say it ranks up in the category of enlightenment of an entire species. One which is far overdue." Thomas swung his machete, slicing through the brush easier than Sarah.

Focusing their efforts on the road, they retreated into a hushed duo, dancing their machetes as fast as possible. The road before them, noticeable by only a slight difference in density from the surrounding forest, and Thomas' knowledge of it, appeared eternal, having no expedient conclusion nor thinning as they went, making the journey tiresome and tedious. Clear and narrow, the path behind them stretched crookedly and mysteriously into the distance, bleeding away beyond sight with the drops of their sweat.

Sounds of breaking branches, falling leaves, and snapping twigs under foot busied their ears from the insects which made them scratch, dig, and rake sunburnt skin until it

grew raw and bled. Sarah's mouth spit a grimace, swinging her machete against her foe, the overgrown path, as had the mouths of many warriors before her, fighting hand to hand, steel to steel, face to face. Each swing, each step, each lunge forward defeated another section of seemingly endless battalions, fury building inside the combatant, making the strike faster, cleaner, stronger. Knowing somewhere in the distance was victory.

Thomas hacked beside her, a clear goal in mind, methodically, patiently, calmly. Wiping his face, he continued, expressing no ferocity, a set countenance in his face giving way only to an occasional smile. His dark eyes caught reflections of the branches in front of him and swallowed them whole, devouring then leaving the remains lying scattered on the trail behind him, broken and draining of the life they so recently held. As he progressed, he spoke to Sarah, staring at the clogged path ahead.

"I hope you didn't get the idea that Carol wasn't important," he said, never missing a swing. "Her death was unfortunate, and a terrible loss, but what I meant was we are all sworn on the most important mission of our time, and no matter if it had been you or me, whoever's left must continue. We must both keep our faith, because two is the minimum to see us through. Our task requires more attention than a few mortal lives."

"Yes. That's why you're leading this expedition and not me, because I loved Carol, and if you hadn't reminded me of what's more important, it's the sort of thing that could have made me turn around and give up any mission. Even with you there, it was hard for me to leave her. She and I had been through a lot together, and I loved her, love her, and always will. There was a time in my life when nothing seemed very worthwhile anymore, and then I met her, and she was so beautiful, and she smiled at me, and I could swear that was when I fell in love."

"Losing your love hurts, but sometimes it is a necessity, and you can't let it stop you from continuing. Your passion shouldn't be lost, and generally that kind of passion seems to have faded from my life, replaced by a drive of duty and a stone view. It's my guess that your passion, yours and Carol's, is why you were put on this mission with me. A balance, to help me remember this is about love. Without that we have nothing at all, and it's better to have someone you love die than to have your love die, if that makes sense."

"Oh, yes, that makes sense. The pain is almost enough to kill me itself, but at least I know feelings still exist in me." Sarah paused momentarily, taking a drink from her canteen.

"That's something I don't have in me as much as I should, and I would be tempted to say you might have too much, but you'll learn to control it more as time goes on, and you must try not to lose it altogether. I'm almost that extreme, and I could learn from someone like you, if it's not too late."

"Well, I'm not sure which is better; all I know is that when she died, there was the same feeling of pointlessness as before we met. But I'm trying, painfully, trying to remember that there is a purpose, and the importance of that purpose."

"You'll do fine. The world has never made advancements without losses, and even if that hadn't happened to Carol, it is important we believe the results of our actions are greater than any losses which may occur because of them."

"I imagine you must be right. Humans have been sacrificing people since the beginning of time for the greater good of the masses, and in one way or another it's necessary." Letting herself get lost in her thoughts, Sarah went forward blindly, swinging the machete automatically, ignoring the constant scratches and bites, tearing thorns and droning insects. Veins pumped in her cutting arm, growing large and bluish, as her opposite hand alternately pushed aside plants and wiped sweat from her face. Air brushed blue eyes narrowing behind dark sunglasses, Sarah gritted her teeth and flexed her machete hand, kicking aside the loose strands of plant at her feet.

Yawning, Thomas peered through the lattice of plants ahead, trying to judge their progress. Seeing nothing more than he had seen along the whole road, he began reciting nursery rhymes quietly to himself.

"Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow? With whips and chains and lovely things and pretty maids all in a row. Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater, had a wife and couldn't beat her. Locked her in a pumpkin shell, and there he wished her straight to hell." Smiling at these, he found them pleasantly distracting. "Little Jack Horner sat in a corner, touching his pulsing blue thumb. When his mother caught him, she straddled and taught him, and made him eat pie 'til he could come." Giggling, he glanced at Sarah to make sure she couldn't hear him, and being convinced she couldn't, he continued. "Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep and doesn't know what to do. Her mother complains about not

getting laid, and her father is missing too. Little Miss Muffett sat on her tuffett, eating her curds and whey, when down came a spider and sat down beside her and enlightened her on how to be gay." Almost unaware of Sarah's presence anymore, or the road they were cutting, Thomas searched his brain for more. "A little old lady lived in a shoe, had so many lovers, she didn't know what to do. Catching one by the hair, she tossed him in the closet and had an affair. Rub a dub dub, three women in a tub, a bull-dyke, a quaker, and a dildo maker. When the tub sprang a leak, the quaker did streak, but the dildo maker was amazed when the dyke called her a faker. Three blind lice, three blind lice, see how they run, see how they run..."

A scream interrupted his illiterary game.

"Get! Damn you! I'll cut you in half!"

"What is it?" Thomas asked, looking back to Sarah.

"Snake. A goddamn big snake."

Seeing where she was pointing her machete, Thomas laughed and waved his hand.

"Don't worry about that. It's just a constrictor, not big enough to harm you, so it's probably more scared than you are. Look at him go; he's trying to get away from you faster than you want him gone."

"Well, I'm not used to seeing snakes like that. It looked big enough to eat us both."

"Naw, don't worry about it. We're making so much of a ruckus, most animals will stay away, including predators, because they know we sound like something that doesn't belong here."

"Either way, I don't like them. They give me the creeps."

"Forget about. We should be through this road soon anyway."

Steady rhythms returned to their machetes, the blood of plants sticky and reflectant on the edges. As Thomas' stronger arm was unhindered by the thicker pieces, his stride pulled him ahead of Sarah, she watching sweat drip down the back of his neck. Red welts had built up on the skin, but she could see no sign that it bothered him or that he even noticed.

"Tell me again, now that the initial shock is gone, and I've had time to rationalize out my emotions," she said. "Why was it completely necessary?"

"I didn't want to, you understand. Hell, she was one of the best people I've ever met, but there are signs." He swung his machete uninterrupted as he spoke. "Those I ignored

as much as possible, but her will diffused, and she tried to turn us against the mission. You can't know how difficult it was for me, any more than I can for you, but there wasn't any choice."

"The importance of our mission."

"If I would've turned pigeon, you should have done the same for me. We stay hawks, or we join the waste. No exceptions can be made anymore."

Closing her eyes, Sarah felt dizzy, and her cutting arm almost halted. Forcing herself to breathe slowly, she hoped her path wasn't straying. The humid air burned her nostrils, and her clothing felt heavy around her body, thick and moist. Breathing deep, she opened her eyes and saw she was progressing correctly.

"Of course," she said, "I am the hawk." Looking forward, she heard Thomas' machete stop, and he disappeared from view.

"Hurry up," he shouted. "Told you it was here."

Walking through his path, Sarah caught up to Thomas as he was setting his machete in the doorway and entering the building. As she followed him inside, he pulled out something on a chain from around his neck.

"Got your key?" he asked.

"I've got your fucking key," she said, cutting across his chest.

Falling to the ground, Thomas dropped his key, and it clattered on the floor by his neck. Blood covered his torso, and he looked up, gasping.

"Carol?" he asked.

"Understanding is not your best attribute." Swinging the blade one last time, she opened a space in his throat.

Discarding the tired weapon on his warm corpse, Sarah picked up Thomas' key and put her pack on the ground. Removing a compact black box, she extended an antenna and went outside.

"I'm at the site now," she spoke into the phone. "Yes, both of them have been eliminated, and everything is guns on. As soon as I have confirmation of the electronic transfer, I'm a happy girl, and you get the keys, launch codes, and location."

Agoraphilia

"So, what's your story?" Peter asked the man.

Lighting a cigarette, the man slowly inhaled, sighing out a plume of smoke. "Like one?"

"Sure," Peter said, looking around to see if anyone was watching.

"It was love... or sex... or something in between. No, no, it was definitely love. That's what made the sex so good.

"I remember candle wax dripping slowly onto her chest, and she tugged at the bonds without speaking anything but a soft moan. The pain didn't bother her, nor did it ever bother me, as it was more than just pain, more than just sex, it was somehow spiritual, deeper than the real world. It brought the more natural feelings if you didn't fight it... it was somehow relieving, yet erotic. Neither of us were bothered by it, and the asphyxiation could even provide great pleasure when done right, but we were always sure not to seriously hurt each other. It was the sort of thing that could trap your spirit forever.

"I don't know if it was she or I who was more afraid to let emotion control us, but it was able to be bypassed with the true affections of related desire. I can't say that we would have had anything if it weren't for sex, but what we got out of that was quite phenomenal.

"She went away for a business trip, somewhere in Europe, and I spent my time alone, working and trying to keep myself busy. When she was gone, I felt an emptiness inside that made me very pensive. For hours I would pace around my apartment, feeling very alone in the world without her. I attributed this feeling to the lack of sex and having to sleep by myself at nights, but anything other than that did not even occur to me. The days

were long, and the hours even longer, each seeming an eternity, yet within these eternities, I could not find the time to accomplish much work.

"When she returned, it had only been three days, yet I was overwhelmingly delighted to see her, and I immediately took her in my arms and kissed her. I wasn't sure how she would react to this, since she wasn't overly fond of public affection, but she bit my ear and whispered that we should go to the bathroom. I thought she meant that she wanted to use the restroom to relieve herself after drinking on the long flight, but she pulled me in with her and started kissing me in the stall. This wasn't much like her, but it pleased me to receive such affection.

"After we reached her place, she opened one of her bags and removed a long satin scarf. Bringing me close to her, she wrapped it around my neck and kissed me, pulling the scarf tight until I became unconscious. When I awoke, I found myself naked and bound between her fireplace and end table with the scarf still around my neck. She stepped up in front of me, completely nude except for a thin leather necklace. Kneeling, she brought her face up to mine then licked my lips, but when I tried to catch her tongue, she pulled away and shook her head. Bringing her head close to mine again, she removed the scarf and licked my neck once, below my right ear. Without warning, she bit that spot, sinking her teeth deep into my skin. My body convulsed involuntarily, and my eyes rolled back in my head as the pain went from my neck, spreading throughout my body, making my head tilt back in ecstasy. When she finished, I could feel the blood freely flowing out of the wound, then she methodically crawled over me and lowered herself onto my pelvis. Things had changed since we first started fooling around...there never used to be blood involved. I liked it.

"Everything returned to normal for a while after that. She went back to work at her office the next day, and I was finally able to get some of my own work done. We spent the nights together, occasionally going out with friends or without them, other evenings relaxing in front of a video or watching cable. Some of my associates asked what happened to my neck, and I told them I had gotten into a fight with some obtuse hick at a bar, but they had seen the strangulation marks before and quietly smiled, nodding their heads.

"Early one morning, we were sleeping at my apartment, and the phone rang. As always, I was too oblivious to understand that I should wake up and answer it, so she

reached over me and picked up the receiver. Trying to tell me that it was a business call, she couldn't get any response, so she whacked me on the head with it until I came to. I apologized to the man on the phone and took down his message then fell back asleep. When I woke up again, I found a cup of fresh, hot coffee steaming on the table beside my bed. Taking a sip from the cup, I thought how lucky I was to be with someone as considerate as she was.

"I brushed my teeth and stepped into the shower. As I grabbed the shampoo, she opened the door and stepped in behind me, taking the bottle from my hand. Gently, she massaged the shampoo into my hair, nearly relaxing me enough to put me back to sleep. She then rinsed out my hair and lathered up herself with soap. Watching her scrub herself, I could not help but get aroused, and after she set the bar of soap back in its dish, she put a leg around my waist and washed my chest with hers.

"After we finished showering, she reminded me about the phone call, which was a damn good thing, because, as always, I had totally forgotten about it. Hanging my towel on the shower door, I went to my nightstand and found the note. Realizing that I should never take a business call when I'm sleeping, I could barely make out my diluted writing that said I agreed to fly to New York the next day for a meeting. I bitched about having to make the trip, then she came into the room and took the towel from her waist and wrapped it around my neck, telling me to stop complaining. I took the towel from her, put it around her neck, and told her I could complain all I wanted. She smiled and rubbed her leg against me as I pulled the towel tighter. Sometimes I wished she did love me."

Yawning, Peter shook his head and asked, "Mind if I get another one of those from you?"

"Of course not," said the man, shuffling out another cigarette.

"Anyway," the man continued, "the next day I caught a morning plane into New York, arriving at my hotel in time for an early lunch. During both my lunch and my meeting, I couldn't stop thinking about her and was surprised that nobody seemed to notice my apparent distraction. I didn't talk to her that night, but I slept restlessly, alone in a strange bed.

"On the second day, my meeting went pretty much the same as the day before, as I was constantly preoccupied with the thought of getting back on the plane and seeing my lover again. After finishing our negotiations, I got my luggage and called a taxi to take me

to the airport. On our way, I realized I was out of cigarettes, so I asked the driver to stop at a store. The area we stopped in wasn't a very good one by middle class suburban standards, and the driver told me to hurry, so I quickly made my purchase and left the store. As I walked out, a man ran into me on the sidewalk.

"'Excuse me,' I said to the man, realizing that I hadn't been watching where I was going.

"'Gimme all your money,' he responded, sticking the barrel of a small pistol into my stomach. I pulled out my wallet and handed it to him.

"'Take it. It's not worth dying over,' I said meaningfully, thinking that I just wanted to get back and see her.

"'No, but it could be worth killing over anyway,' he said, sliding the gun from my stomach to my chin. 'You should be more careful in this part of the city.' He cocked the gun and smiled.

"Just then, a skateboarder tripped over a dog that had run out of a building and slammed into the mugger, knocking him away from me and into the street. An old lady in a white sedan hit her brakes but was not successful in stopping before her car struck the mugger. As he lay there, I was unsure if he was alive or dead, but I noticed my wallet lying on the ground, so I picked it up and walked back to the cab, unnoticed by everyone in the confusion.

"'Aren't you going to wait for the police to show up?' asked the cabby.

"'Not unless you want to,' I said. 'I have a plane to catch.'

"'Sounds fine to me, mack. If I waited to talk to the police every time I saw something happen in this city, I'd never get any damn work done.' He put the car in drive and took me to the airport.

"When I arrived home, I found a note on the table inside my door that said she would be stopping by after she was done with work. I brought my bags upstairs and changed into a kilt then laid back on the couch and closed my eyes, relaxing to the thawing sounds of Beethoven. I tried to forget how much my feelings for her reminded me of love and let the tension that was knotting my entire body float away with the music. Finally, some of my worries seemed to subside, and I dozed off during >>Pathétique<<.

"I awoke with her succulently kissing me on the mouth, and Jane's Addiction pumping its rhythm in the background. As the line 'sex is violent' came on, I looked at her and

knew that I loved her, wishing that it was only possible she might feel the same for me someday. She took the scarf she had gotten in Europe from her neck and wrapped it around mine. She looked so beautiful, and her long, brown hair fell across my face as she bit my lip. Tightening the scarf, she bit harder on my lip until it bled, and somehow she looked very sad yet happier than I had ever seen her. She pulled the scarf tighter, and I could feel the fluctuating sensation of a blackout coming on.

"I love you," she said, pulling the scarf even tighter.

"I knew she wasn't going to stop pulling the scarf after I passed out this time, but that didn't bother me. I loved her, and I knew she loved me. There could be no better way to die than with perfect love."

"Hmm... I don't know," said Saint Peter. "If that's love, it's pretty twisted. May I have another cigarette?"

My Castle

Early in my life I had been taught to set goals and work to achieve those which appeared to be most important. At some point when I was still young, although I'm not sure where my youth went to age or if it even has yet, my desires set me to wanting a large, magnificent estate, characterized by the home I wished to build, one that would give me every bit of pride and comfort a person could look for in life, including privacy and security, which might allow me the opportunity to labor at writing without the disturbing distractions of unwanted guests taking up my time.

Having put all my efforts into this goal, I had erected, much of the labor coming from myself, a sizable castle, complete with towering stone walls many feet thick, expending most everything I had, leaving me much poorer but secure. Behind these enormous walls, my castle loomed large and quiet, a sanctuary surpassing each of my original intentions, with long, airy hallways, smooth stone floors and walls, decorated with various art I had collected through journeys about the world. Each room, and there were many since my home was built on as a grand a scale as I could afford, despite my living alone, was immaculately kept, tidy and garnished with any luxury a self-preserving bachelor could require.

Rooms for separate occasions, even separate moods, were arranged according to how I wished to spend my time. A special chamber, made up of many rooms, contained games of all sorts, whether I felt like playing mindless, time consuming amusements or testing my mind with intricate, thought provoking challenges. For writing, I set aside five rooms, a different room depending on what sort of story I tried to achieve, be it a tragedy, romance, comedy, melodrama, or horror, and seven positions in each room for diverse characterization. Of course, on occasion, I wrote outside of these rooms, in my well

tended garden, where I was able to grow a rare strain of black rose, or atop the walkway of my wonderful walls. And the bedrooms each had their own personality, though none was as great as the master bedroom, which was larger than any of the others by at least twice the area, and it remained uncluttered with ample space to pace about without retracing the same path for hours. Attached on one side was a bathroom, having both bathtub and shower, where the tub had a whirlpool option, and the shower contained jets in each side. Confident in the belief that no one had ever lived in such a perfect home, I walked happily through my halls without the worry of being disturbed by any unwanted visitors.

Many neighbors and relatives thought I had lost my mind spending what fortune was in my possession to build such an extravagant castle at these times, especially since, they argued, it must be terribly expensive to heat. "Most of the time I prefer it colder," I told them, "and the stone feels solid under my feet when I roam from room to room, losing myself among some new intricacy in the walls I haven't noticed before."

So, I loved my castle, and smiled with pride at having it here for only me, protecting me from the weather and giving me a place to write without somebody stopping by every ten minutes, interrupting my thoughts. Enjoying this solitude, I was laboriously at work on a larger tragic novel which was finally taking shape and the chapters were falling from my word processor faster than I could type. Bent over a hand crafted marble desk, the soft leather of the chair unnoticed as it cushioned my buttocks, the words flashing off the screen took me from my physical surroundings into a semi-physical reality created by my own mind. The heroine was becoming stronger, each time she was pushed by the blood another man beat out of her, she became more vengeful and her senses more aware. Smoking a Salem, she let the cool menthol numb her body; plotting her future actions which would insure the justice due her. Then a faint tink, tink killed my words in mid-sentence, made me feel the leather at my seat, and I stopped writing, listened. Tink, tink. There it was again. What a strange sound, I thought, lighting a cigarette of my own, waiting to see if it came again.

Tink, tink.

Dammit, what could be making that bothersome noise, I wondered. Leaving my desk, I walked through a hallway, aiming for a staircase to the basement, believing some fault in the plumbing or other utility was born for my distraction. Anger partially covered my

strides, as I swore at the contractors who had assured me I wouldn't need service for years to come. Reaching the basement, I looked around, waited, listening for the sound to give away its broken irritant.

Tink, tink.

The sound was not coming from my basement, so I went back upstairs and out to my garden, to see if something was happening out there. When I got outside, the sunshine was heavy in the midday, and I pulled a pair of sunglasses from my pocket and put them on. Looking around the lawn, the trees, bushes, flowers, I couldn't find anyone, so my feet followed a path along the wall. Then the sound came again.

Tink, tink.

This time it was more distinct, and it was coming through my wall! What in the world could be tapping on my wall, I wondered, heading for a spire to reach the top. Taking the last step up, I was on top of the wall, marching quickly along the side, looking over to the ground, and I saw her.

"Hello," I yelled down, "what are you doing there? Do you have any idea how annoying that is when I'm trying to work in here?"

"Work in there?" she said, setting the sledgehammer at her side. "And what sort of work goes on in there?"

"I'm writing," I told her. "Writing a new novel that hasn't been wanting to come until today, and now you're out here beating on my wall with that mallet of yours. Could you please tell me what this is all about?"

"I'm part of a local organization here in town, and we're worried that you're not safe in there, behind these cement walls, where no one can get in to see you."

"Don't worry about me. I have everything I need in here, and I couldn't be safer, as long as people like you aren't trying to destroy what I've built."

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," she said, seeming genuine from my view, "but we were worried, as I said. All apologies for disturbing you. I'll leave you to your work now."

"Thank you," I said as she picked up her sledgehammer and walked away. What a curious thing, for someone to assail your home and say they were worried. Shaking my head, I returned to my word processor, but the ambition was already lost for the day.

Time passed, and I came up with many short stories and partials, but that novel refused to show itself to me, and in trying to keep from ruining it with overdone effort,

other stories were given that quiet time. Finishing a rough version of a love story, I went out to the garden and sat on a bench, smoking a cigarette and admiring the fresh growth in the morning light. I had been awake all night, and my tired eyes relaxed in the company of each budding flower. Picking a white rose, I smelled it and walked over to the black strain, cherishing each dark rose but picking none, since they were far too precious to disturb, except on special occasions. Touching one of the sharp thorns, a yawn made my eyes water, and I retreated to bed, placing the white rose in a vase on the nightstand.

Waking early in the afternoon, I showered and went outside for breakfast, drinking a Bloody Mary with extra pickle juice. Looking over the story I had finished the previous night, I edited with some care, then went back inside. Spending the remainder of the daylight doing nothing of importance, I found myself at the marble desk with a quarter moon shining through the window over my shoulder. My patient novel was again opening itself to me, slowly at first, but more as the night progressed, and the heroine was getting better than I had planned.

A dark spark grew inside her with each passing day, and as every new man in her life turned out to be cruel and violent, she learned more about the human mind and how society shaped the reactions of males, understanding how to predict each response per action. She had gotten involved in Tai Chi, and her body was more one with her mind than she had thought would be possible. All the years of being dominated by men, letting them tell her how she felt, what she should do, when to have sex, and accepting physical and mental punishment for not listening or obeying seemed so foolish and weak, and now she was prepared to live life on her own terms, becoming active with women's groups and avoiding the kinds of men that had treated her so badly.

Tink, tink, clank.

Oh shit, I thought, looking out at the morning sun. What now? Letting the glow of the screen leave my eyes, I walked out of the room and felt the cold stone floor under my feet, heading for the wall.

Tink, tink, clank.

Is this going to continue until I can't write anymore? Well, she better have a good excuse for it this time. Reaching the wall, I mounted it, peering down to the ground on the other side, expecting to throw a tumult of obscenities at the repeat offender, but there was a different woman down there.

"Stop that," I screamed. "Now, please, why are you hammering on my wall?"

"We believe," and I wondered what was meant by this we when she was alone, if she was part of that organization the other woman had mentioned, "that you're practicing some manner of witchcraft in there. Our community is a good, wholesome one, the kind that takes generations to perfect, and keeping yourself locked away from outsiders makes us think you must be going about some evil, Satanic business in there."

"I assure you," I insisted, "that I am up to nothing but innocent work in here and mean no harm to anyone. My privacy is very dear to me, because without it, my writing seems to be forever interrupted, just as you are now doing. You have my word that I am no madman, and my sanity is perfectly in tact, but please leave me alone and stop this racket."

Packing her equipment, she departed my wall and left in her place a mere pile of dust from the defeated jackhammer. In the quiet that followed, I thought my work would go on without any sounds other than nature to busy my ears, but before the day ended, I could hear more of them outside trying to destroy what I had built. When insults couldn't turn them away, merely driving one away to a distance who was immediately replaced by another, I went back inside and grew somewhat accustomed to their noise, safe in the knowledge that nothing they could do would be able to break through the structure I had so thoughtfully planned and built.

Once again, I was unable to accomplish any work on the novel, but toiled around the house and grounds doing little chores, keeping my time occupied when not writing or editing stories. The rose garden was my favorite place at this time, and I spent hours at a time sitting and watching the flowers, especially the black roses. After sitting there for many days like this, I believed the movement of their growth was actually becoming physically apparent to me, not that I could see the difference as one does with a growing child, but that their movement was visible. Certainly this was no more than a result of spending too many hours doing nothing other than looking at the flowers, or perhaps in doing this, my concentration waned at times, making me only notice glimpses now and then as a time lapse camera does. Those roses became as dear to me as anything else in the world, and they kept me from hearing the pounding of the equipment outside my walls.

As this noise came to be an unnoticed, daily event, it took a place at the back of my mind, and the novel returned to life. Typing through the long span of the night, the story progressed, nearing its end as dawn sent threatening notes through my window. My heroine was no longer the suppressed, violated woman she had once been, as she was now able to both mentally and physically defend herself against the kind of men she loathed. Although she went from a dependent, downtrodden submissive to a free, tough spirit, she remained feminine and did not reject males in general, finding love in the most poetically genuine man she had ever met. Emerging much as an heroic comedy, her life became everything positive, and she was engaged to spend the rest of it in as perfect a bliss as may be encountered. However, she went dancing with some friends from one of her women's groups, her fiancé planning to meet them, and outside the club, one of the friends was smoking a joint when a burly man assaulted and raped her. The heroine went outside to find the friend and get a couple hits, discovering a crying and bleeding semblance with a torn dress. Quickly listening to what happened, the heroine ran in the direction of the assailant, who had departed mere moments before, and believed she caught him in a dimly lit street. Not caring about the ethics of violence only as self-defense, or seeing the justice in using brutal force against a rapist, she attacked him with every bit of fighting knowledge she had. Breaking a knee, then a wrist, she continued, pounding the man's head into the pavement until the front of his skull split open and his body convulsed and went limp. Feeling triumphant, she pushed the body over with her foot and looked at the face. It was her fiancé.

Tink, clank, bang!

Anger, victory, and anguish fought inside my head when the sounds of new, heavier equipment buffeted my wall. Nearly throwing the floor from my feet, I paraded outside, through the garden, where the sight of my beautiful roses angered me more because the noise had to be upsetting them, plucking one black rose, I carried it with me, caressing it against the thorns, and climbed to the top of the wall.

"Why the hell can't you just leave me alone! Get away from here, I don't want you coming inside, and I don't want to hear your banging around out here anymore! Just get away, dammit. Stay out of my life, or I'll call the police." The noise stopped, and I noticed a woman getting out of the tractor of a wrecking ball.

"Fine," she said, "don't say I didn't try." Casting her hard hat into the cab of the tractor, a lever moved inside and it started advancing. As the wrecking ball neared, I noticed the woman was Michelle Page, and I had once seen her sing with such wonder that I wanted to invite her in but had forgotten to do so as I was busy with my own work, and now she was walking away.

"Wait," I shouted, "come back. Won't you come in, please. I've looked forward to seeing you for so long. Please come back. I've been so busy I forgot to notice you out here." But she was too far gone to hear me, and I was stuck atop the wall, watching her disappear.

Holding my black rose, the wrecking ball neared my wall, and as it came in contact it must have hit a weak spot by chance, because suddenly stones were falling everywhere, and I toppled to the ground outside, being injured to the point where I couldn't move, seeing my rose crushed under a rock, barely out of my reach.

When I was released from the hospital, I phoned the contractors and had them start on a new wall, a thicker, sturdier one with no weak points. But I remembered Michelle, and so had them install a door into the wall. Of course, the door was made of Kevlar, and the best security system was in place, but also inserted was a doorbell.

Perfect Sphere

"You've got to be a real go getter, honey," said Enrique, blowing the steam over the top of his coffee. "Now, take me for example; when I started out, I busted my ass morning, noon, and night, hounding down stories. That's what made me so good, and now those days are past for me, and I'm the premier anchorman in everybody's living room. Of course, there are other ways to move up around here. I do have a lot of influence, you know, honey."

Juliana wondered how he could have ever become such a famous, well respected reporter, but then again, she thought, the news business didn't exactly call for originality; it needed simple, concise lingo that people could relate to and recognize everyday. Okay, she thought, I'm not fucking him to get a promotion, but he is right. I'll never be a daily face with America, if I don't scare out the big stories.

"Have you ever wondered what would happen if you took a perfect sphere, lined the inside with a mirrored surface and flashed a light inside that had no means of escape?" asked Michael, an optical engineer, lunching on turkey sandwiches and a California merlot.

"Yes," Hans, a physicist, returned. "Wow, I thought I was the only person who really spent so much time imagining what the light would do."

"Exactly. Would the light shine perpetually after the initial flash, or would it evaporate, burning up all its energy?"

"You would think it might run out of energy, but if the mirrored surface was perfect and didn't let any of it escape, trapping all the energy the light put out, maybe it wouldn't stop... ever. And maybe something else might happen, some form of feedback."

"The problem is, to create such a flawless contraption, you wouldn't be able to see what was occurring inside, nor could you open it and look in quick to see if there's any light, because as soon as you did, the light would escape, if it's still in there."

"What if you built it out of one way glass? Then you could shine a bright light in, turn it off, and watch the results from outside."

"No, that sort of mirror wouldn't hold enough of the energy."

"True. True," said Hans in a glum voice.

"But if you had only a minute portion of it made of the highest quality one way glass, say the size of a microscopic lens, it might contain it well enough."

"We could probably build one and set up a lens and powerful light small enough that they wouldn't interfere with the light."

"Between the two of us, we ought to have enough knowledge to make everything needed for it to work."

"We could develop a camera and lens that sees exactly like a human eye."

"And since this would be in a sphere, the mirror could actually be made to amplify the light it reflects."

"And we could watch what does or doesn't happen from outside, on a monitor hooked up to the camera."

"This will work."

Holding half of his body inside the doorway, Hans waved a hand behind him, signaling to Michael.

"Okay. Try the light once."

"Here goes." Michael pushed a button on a control panel, and an intense light flashed for a fraction of a second near Hans.

"Perfect. How is the camera working?"

"Beautifully. Everything is absolutely clear. Close the door, and let's see what happens."

Hans left the doorway and walked over to the panel, flicked a lever, and the huge door on the sphere slowly moved up until it clicked into place.

"Okay, I've got the timer on thirty seconds, so tell me when to start it, and I'll be over there."

"Start it," said Michael.

Touching a button, Hans left the panel and quickly walked over by Michael, who was stationed in front of a television screen, rubbing his fingernails together, counting backward silently. Standing beside him, Hans tapped a finger against his jaw, softly biting the end of his tongue. They waited, counting, rubbing, tapping, biting, and waited, waited, then flash. Both men stood and stared at the television screen, neither rubbing, tapping, nor biting, and no longer waiting.

"It's, it's, it's..." muttered Hans.

"Yes, everything is so..." added Michael.

"I know. Nothing could, I mean, I never imagined, it's so..."

"There," Michael finished for him.

"Can you believe it's taken us this long?"

"All the debates and wars and social disorder, and this was all we needed?"

"All this time, and we've finally found it."

"The meaning of life." Michael was the first to turn away from the screen, and he walked over to the control panel, flipped a switch, and the door opened on the sphere, revealing an empty, mirrored area. "Are you ready?"

"Could there be any question?"

Pushing some buttons, Michael followed Hans through the door and into the sphere. After they stepped inside, the door softly closed behind them, and the panel counted down to zero before flashing the light.

Pushing a cart, Alobar, a janitor, walked into the laboratory where Hans and Michael had the sphere erected. Noticing a television casting snowy shadows on its screen, he pushed the power button, and it blinked away into an empty, dark surface. Walking past the stand the television sat on, Alobar hunted out the wastebasket by the control panel, and with a satisfactory "swish," emptied it into his cart. Moving energetically around the room, he sang to himself, an old song he had learned from his great grandmother who

once informed him it was a legendary fable back in the old country. Although he had been singing this song most of his life, he never knew what it meant, but he liked the sound of it so much, he sang it every morning at work, in the shower, and while lying in bed, preparing to swim through the sleep coated hallucinations where beautiful foreign women always knew him as a famous poet and wanted to mother his children.

Finished with the room, he was on his way out, so he could tidy the rest of the important offices and labs before everyone started showing up for the day, then he saw a VCR was still on under the television. Reaching down to turn the power off, he noted it was a model that automatically rewound the tape when it came to the end, unlike the cheap one in his apartment, which seemed to constantly break, and only half the buttons ever worked on the remote. Looking at his watch, he guessed he had almost an hour before anyone else besides the guard at the front desk would be around, so he turned the monitor back on and pressed play on the video machine.

"Jerst because I'm ony a constitutional ingeneer don't mean I shouldn't never get to see whoot goes on 'round 'ere," he said to himself. "Mubee I cood 'ave some idears miself." As the tape began to play, he stopped talking to himself and looked at the screen, then he saw the flash, and his mouth opened slightly, a thin line of spittle at its corner. After a short time, he turned from the screen and walked toward the control panel.

"Nanna, oo never did understond dat song," said Alobar, then pushed the switch to open the door, pressed some more buttons, and walked into the sphere.

"Okay, people, please quiet down," said Isabella to the members of the board. "This appears to be a very serious matter. So far, we've lost the two men who created this project, a janitor, three members of our board, and a babysitter. As all of you have seen from the security videos, all of these people entered the sphere, and none ever left, yet when we checked, the sphere was empty. Now, all of them entered the sphere after watching the test run video, so it would be safe to assume that for the time being, none of us should watch it or be careless enough to let someone else get a hold of it."

"But what's in the sphere?" asked a board member.

"Yes," said another. "We're all scientists, so how can we let this go unexplained. How can we just pretend something extraordinary isn't in there?"

"From the security video," answered Isabella, "it seems that everyone who watched the video in that room, where we could see their reaction, had some sort of revelation. Michael and Hans appear to have said something about the meaning of life, and then they went into the sphere and disappeared."

"All the more reason we can't simply ignore the project."

"No, indeed we need to find out what's in there," Isabella pushed some papers back and forth in front of her, "but it would be foolish for us to watch the video and risk disappearing like the others without knowing more. The option of video testing is obviously out, so we need another route."

"We need human testing."

"There's no other way to find out what they're seeing," agreed another, "unless we have someone watch the video and then question them before they can get in the sphere."

"Does everyone here believe this is the only way we can go?" Isabella looked around the small group and saw them all looking expectantly at her. "Okay, does anybody disagree with that idea?" Every head shook slightly and quietly back and forth. "Fine. We'll start testing this on people, but we have to relocate the sphere, and I don't need to tell any of you that this is to be a rather, um, secret venture. Rumors are already getting out about what's happened, and reporters have been outside all day, trying to get interviews." Pausing, Isabella took a drink of water and sighed. "I also think it would be best to keep the video away from the sphere, so we don't start losing people."

"What about Jenkins' babysitter? She didn't know where the sphere was, but after seeing the video it took her less than twenty minutes to reach it."

"We can restrain the subjects if need be; it's for their own good after all."

"Whoa, man, that's like, the shit. Yeah, that's it, man. It's all right there, the whole thing."

"Good, Samuel, but can you tell us what you saw?" asked Isabella. "What did you see on the screen?"

"I can't believe you haven't watched it," said Samuel. "Like, the whole thing, you know, it's all there."

"Can you be more specific? We need to know what you saw."

"You mean what was on the video? You should really watch it."

"Could you please tell us exactly what you saw?"

"Well, yeah, but you need to watch it yourself."

"Please, we must know more about it to decide if it's safe for the general public."

"First there was this, like, bright flash. Makes your eyes kind of weird for a second. Then, it's like whoosh, right there. Like a hit in the center of your forehead, and bang... everything."

"What do you mean by 'everything?'"

"The answer, man."

"The answer to what?"

"To what? To everything, man. I'm telling you, it's the key. You know, the meaning of life, the eternal question, the key. It's what we've been looking for throughout all of time."

"But what is the answer?"

"That is, man, that's the answer right there," said Samuel, pointing to the sphere. "It's, like, you're asking the right question, but you don't seem to understand the question, so you're looking for the wrong kind of answer."

"Can't you give us a more specific answer? Something simple we can all understand?"

"I'm giving you the simplest answer. Man, you just don't understand the question. Right there; I'm telling you that's the answer right there. Just watch it and you'll know."

"Fine, thank you, Samuel. Go ahead," Isabella raised her hands in a short gesture then rubbed her eyes and shook her head. She and the rest of the committee watched as Samuel set the control panel, entered the sphere, and was gone. "What else is there to do? We get the same response from everyone, regardless of age, educational background, race, gender, sexual persuasion, and even religious beliefs. No matter what we've done, they can't be restrained, and they even know how to reconstruct the sphere when they find it. What can we do?"

"We could destroy the sphere."

"No, even then, I'm sure they could probably build one of their own out of sand," said Isabella. "And that's assuming we would want to destroy it. We need to learn what happens to them inside the sphere."

"Impossible. We've gotten the same response from those who only watched the part of the tape with Michael and Hans in there, and no one has ever come out of the sphere yet."

"I think that tape is doing something to their minds."

"Obviously," said Isabella, "but that isn't even the important part. If the question were whether or not this is a mind control device we would worry about that, but there is no reasonable explanation for them disappearing in the sphere. Light cannot make a person completely disintegrate in seconds."

"Maybe it really is the answer."

"Maybe," said Isabella.

Bass pounded in the room, as Juliana watched the people on the dance floor and held a Malibu and pineapple juice in one hand. After pondering some question in her mind, she took off her sweater, revealing a tight, cropped, white tee-shirt that was almost thin enough to inform on the color of her areolae, and turned back to Donovan.

"Don't you think if somebody discovered the meaning of life that it would only be fair to let the rest of the world in on it?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," said Donovan, eying her tee-shirt. "I prefer not to think about those kinds of things too much."

Pulling a cigarette from her pack, Juliana lit it and tapped it briskly against an ashtray. She had been getting the same response from Donovan for over two hours now, and although he was getting drunk, it didn't seem like the alcohol was changing anything, but the way he was looking at her tee-shirt and the bottom of her short skirt seemed positive.

"I'm sick of being here," she said, hopping off her stool. "Let's go back to my place."

"Okay," replied Donovan with a grin.

Turning the lock on the door, Juliana guided Donovan through her apartment and into her bedroom, where she pushed him down on her bed and smiled at him. Exhaling a brandy scented breath, he reached out a hand and began to fondle one of her breasts. Leaning forward, Juliana kissed him then removed his hand from her breast and took off her clothes. After Donovan followed her lead, she knelt down and put her head in his lap for a few moments, then crawled onto the bed, pulling Donovan with her.

"That was the best," said Juliana, turning her head away, blowing a stream of smoke into the air, and looking up to check the ceiling. "God, I think I must have come six times."

"Six?" asked Donovan, smiling.

"Yes, six, and I never come." She smoked her cigarette, and Donovan lay by her side, smiling and bobbing his head. After sitting in silence for many minutes, Juliana turned back toward him. "So, don't you think the world is entitled to know the meaning of life, if it's really there?"

"Sure, I guess."

"And you do believe in the freedom of information, don't you? Especially if it would benefit all of mankind?"

"I don't see why not."

"Good. C'mon, let's go," Juliana slid out of bed and began dressing.

"Where?"

"To the lab you work at."

"What for?"

"So we can get that video tape."

"I don't think that's a very good idea."

"Oh, come on, I'd do it for you," she said, leaning over the bed, stroking the inside of his thigh with one hand.

"You would? You would risk your job for me?"

"Absolutely."

"You like me that much?"

"I have a confession to make, Donovan. You see, I've never slept with someone on the first date before, and you made me come. There's a special, natural bond between us; I can feel it."

"Really?"

"Yes, I think I might be falling in love with you."

"Oh, I don't know," he said, shaking his head.

"Come on. For me, please." She put her mouth on his and kissed him very softly.

"Oh," he sighed. "Okay, I guess maybe it's okay. You really think you love me?"

"There's such a feeling in my heart," Juliana clutched her chest and checked the ceiling again.

They drove to the lab in Donovan's car, and when they parked, Donovan leaned over to Juliana and kissed her.

"I think I love you too."

"You're so sweet."

"Well, c'mon, let's go in."

"That's probably not a good idea," said Juliana. "I'm sure they wouldn't allow me in there, but you could go in, say you forgot something earlier, get the tape, and we could go back and watch it at my apartment."

"Okay, maybe you're right. Jim's pretty strict about the rules, so he might not let you in. I'll be right back," he said and kissed her again.

Juliana smoked and waited, looking at her cuticles and picking her teeth with a fingernail. Ten minutes and three cigarettes later, Donovan came back to the car and handed her a video tape.

"Here it is," he said. "Jim never even questioned me. He's kind of slow, I think."

Stepping out of the car at Juliana's apartment building, Donovan smiled and looked at Juliana.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Juliana, looking at her watch, "but I almost forgot, I have to run to work right now." She dashed over and kissed him. "You're a dear," and took off for her car.

"But what about the tape?"

"Don't worry, I'll take care of it. Bye, bye. I'll call you later. Oh, be sure to go home right away and watch the news," and Donovan was left standing in the door of his car alone.

"Here it is," said Juliana, when Enrique showed up to the newsroom. "I did some hounding, as you say, and I've got the story of the decade. You know that business about all those people disappearing at that laboratory, and some video tape with the meaning of life?"

"Yes," said Enrique, "and?"

"And this is it," she said, holding up the tape. "This is the original tape, so let's make me a career."

"That right there is the tape?"

"The very one."

"Okay, you've got it. Let's cue it up, and you can announce it right before commercial break, then we'll show it after the break."

"Why don't we just go right into a special newsbreak, instead of waiting through the commercials, just in case. And as big as this story's been lately, we should sell simultaneous broadcast rights to the other stations before going on."

"Good. Maybe you are professional material. I'll get the deal faxed, but this better be the real thing, or you won't ever work in television again. I'm putting my name behind it to get the contracts right away."

"Thanks. Don't worry, this is definitely the real thing."

While Juliana changed clothes, Enrique got the station manager and telephoned the other stations, who all wanted simultaneous broadcasting as Juliana had thought. At the end of the commercial break, regular programming was interrupted, and Juliana showed up on everyone's television screen.

"Good morning everyone, this is Juliana Intel with a special bulletin. We have acquired the video tape from Philostein Laboratories, which is rumored to contain the answer to the meaning of life, and we will now broadcast in its entirety, uninterrupted, the secret video of the mirrored sphere."

A technical engineer pushed a button, and Hans and Michael's video played for the whole of the television watching world.

The Suicide Machine
(a Christmas story)

An old man sat with his thick hand stroking the arm of his chair. His thin hair stood out from his head on its own directive, his skin was wrinkled and loose on his body, his movements were slow, and his body made noises every time he moved. But through the tired flesh his eyes peered clearly and intently out to the four children around him.

The abundant fleece of snow covering the mountains could be seen through the large windows in front of him, spread down the hillside and over the top of the neighboring peaks. The children's parents, and the parents' parents, were skiing and would not return for the rest of the afternoon. Logs burned in an immense, brick fireplace to his left, more as decoration than utility, and Christmas ornaments hung from the ceiling, the walls, and the large spruce tree in the corner. Presents were piled under the tree, wrapped in red, green, silver, flowers, cartoon characters, and tiny Santa Clauses.

One strong, withered hand clutched a glass of eggnog, and a bottle of whiskey stood on a nearby table.

"There's a Christmas story I've never told you children," the old man said, as he leaned forward and squinted his eyes at them. "It's my favorite story, one that reminds me why we gather here like this every winter."

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A young man in his early twenties put one large bag of marijuana, one large bag of hashish, and one small bag of marijuana inside a small backpack, slid a silver flask into the pocket of his jacket, and pushed a pair of dark sunglasses over his stern, gray eyes. The sun was large and bright as it began its ascent over the eastern peak, reflected

harshly off the clean, powdery snow outside. He took the backpack and walked out to a beaten four wheel drive, entered the driver's door, and set the pack on the back seat.

"Jason," said Pete, another young man who entered the passenger side of the truck, "this new run is going to be so killer. New boards, new boots, new run, we are going to heaven today."

Jason engaged the first gear and pushed on the throttle. "Heaven. This run's gonna rock so hard heaven could never compare. Straight up rush from hell and nobody but the two of us to grab it and ride it as raw as Cilla's sushi." They pulled out onto the main road, and Jason put more pressure on the accelerator. "You got the wine, right?"

"Two bottles, wrapped and waiting in my bag."

When they reached the heliport the sun had nearly gotten half of itself over the peak and it burned fiercely. A tall man in large sunglasses and a flight suit met them as they parked.

"Good morning," he said with a grin. "Are you ready to go up?"

"All we need to do is get loaded and take off, Heath," answered Jason as he hopped from the truck.

As Jason and Pete took their packs from the back seat, Heath retrieved their boards from the back hatch and led them to a polished, black helicopter. The equipment was stowed, everyone was seated, and the blades turned. Heath maneuvered the helicopter slowly away from the landing pad and into the open sky. The pad and the truck fell behind them faster, and the swirls of snow from the rotary blades settled into a soft dust below them. Jason opened his backpack and removed the large bags of marijuana and hashish. He jumped into the front seat next to Heath and tossed the bags into the pilot's lap.

"Alright," said Heath, as he examined the bags in his lap. "Can always count on you."

"No, no," said Jason, "we can always count on you. Our chariot of excitement. Should we spark one?"

"By all means," said Heath. "As they say, don't fly unless you want to get high."

"Pete," Jason turned his head toward the back.

"Already skinning one," said Pete. "A big, fat, welcome to the day baby."

Heath inhaled the final puff of smoke, tossed the remainder of the joint out, then dove the helicopter down, pulling up at the last moment to blow on the hillside with his blades.

He swung out in an arc away from the land and tilted them all in their seats. Jason grabbed a handle next to his seat and looked back to Pete.

"Hold on, Methuselah, I think our pilot's stoned again." Jason gripped the handle tighter as Heath responded with a more severe arc, causing him to slide in his seat.

"Yeah, yeah, here we go."

The helicopter carried them up the mountain to a peak where the entire sun was now visible, and Heath steadied it near the ground.

"Okay, the taxi has landed, boys," said Heath. "Have fun and I'll see you soon."

"A nip before the cold," said Jason. He pulled the flask from his pocket and passed it to Pete.

"Thank you, thank you," said Pete, took a swallow then handed the flask back to Jason, who took his drink with a nod before redepositing the container in his pocket. Pete and Jason zipped their jackets, tightened their packs, clipped into their boards, and jumped to the mountain below. Heath pulled away, and they surfed down the slope through the miniature blizzard the helicopter made to say goodbye.

∞

Pete flew from a cliff, grabbed his board and pulled a flip over the exposed rocks below, then landed smoothly. Jason followed, added a twist to his flip, and landed in Pete's tracks. They skidded to a stop near some more rocks and dismounted their boards.

"Time for lunch?" asked Pete, as he removed his pack and jacket.

"Indeed," said Jason, "the perfect spot for lunch."

Their jackets became cushions on the rocks, and Pete took the bottles of wine from his pack. They looked down the untouched snow over the valley and drank their wine. The sun lit everything, prominent in the day, reflected off their sunglasses and bottles. Once finished, Pete slid the empty bottles back in his pack, then the two friends redonned their jackets, clipped into their boards, and continued to carve a path down the mountain.

Boards stacked outside, Jason and Pete entered the ski lodge and walked upstairs to the bar. Vacationers and locals mixed around the fireplaces, drinks in hand, and talked merrily amidst the poppy music that radiated from the speakers around the room. A thin woman with green eyes and a heavy gray sweater jumped on Jason with her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"Just in time," she said and kissed his mouth then his neck. "Everyone's here, and your drinks are on the table."

"You're so warm, Cilla," said Jason. He grabbed her butt, pulled her up, and returned her kiss.

"Just for you," she replied.

The group of friends toasted the evening, ate supper, talked loudly, sang obnoxiously, and danced recklessly. Pricilla rubbed her cheek against Jason's as they danced and wrapped her arms around his body.

"I'm pissed at you," Pricilla whispered into his ear.

"What?" asked Jason. "I've been boarding all day. How could I have done anything wrong?"

"Heath told us about your trip up to the peak. You know I hate it when you get him stoned when you're flying."

"Aw, that's nothing. He was getting stoned the whole time he flew for the Navy."

"Not with you in the seat beside him. And you and Pete had a liquid lunch again, didn't you?"

"Just one bottle of wine."

"One for you and one for Pete?"

"Well, we made it here fine. It was a great day."

"I love you," said Pricilla. "You know that, don't you? I really, really do love you."

"I love you too," said Jason, took her face in his hands and kissed her on the mouth.

"Do you?" she asked.

"You know I love you."

"You're going to kill yourself. I can't stand the way you play. Do you have any idea what it's going to be like for me when I have to go to your funeral?"

"I love you," said Jason and kissed her again.

∞

Jason woke up to the tasteless ring of his phone.

"Get up and have some breakfast," said Pete through the speaker. "I have a surprise for you today."

"What is it?" asked Jason.

"Oh, my god, you're going to love this," said Pete.

"So what is it?" asked Jason.

"An experiment."

"What kind of experiment?"

"You'll see. Trust me, you're going to be making loads of special ingredient when you see these beauties."

Breakfast was an orange and a bowl of cereal with raisins. It was followed by a beer in front of the window, watching for Pete to drive up. Jason's eyes squinted as he looked for his sunglasses. He looked around him, searched through the living room, checked his bedroom, then finally found them on the kitchen table. Just as he settled back in front of the window Pete walked in the door.

"Get your gloves and let's go," said Pete.

"Have a beer," responded Jason.

"Take 'em with us. We gotta get going. This is way too cool to wait."

They parked alongside two other vehicles and joined the two women and three men who awaited their arrival. Heath rushed to meet them.

"Merry Christmas, men," he said. "Did you tell him yet?" Heath asked Pete.

"Nope," said Pete. "Couldn't spoil this surprise. Just told him how orgasmic it's going to be."

"Do I get to know now?" asked Jason.

"You get to see now," said Heath. "C'mon." He led them to the other people and two large, black contraptions. "Stealth, huh."

"Hanggliders?" said Jason.

"No, no, no," said Heath. "Experimental stealth gliders from the Navy."

"How'd you get them?" asked Jason.

"You know," shrugged Heath, "it's Christmas."

"Yeah, cool," said Jason. "So what's different about them?"

"Sleek ass design, fast as hell, agile," said Heath. "They're nicknamed the devil's wings."

"Alright," said Jason, "rockin'. I'm ready."

"Tell him," said Pete. "Tell him about the special thing."

"The special thing," said Heath, "is what makes it so Christmas." He pointed to a level on the glider. "You're going to think this baby's a rocket to start, but when you pull this level just watch the world disappear."

Jason and Pete strapped on their helmets and attached themselves to the gliders. With a couple steps they jumped from the cliff and dove down before making an ascent. The gliders flew faster than any civilian models they'd ever encountered, and their reactions had to be fast and tight to avoid crashing.

They zoomed into the sky, took the valley. Jason veered to the right, dipped and skimmed the tree line. Pete swung left, cut back and teased a rocky ledge. Both grabbed the air and went up. They swooped, they played, they hollered with adrenaline. Trees and rocks passed faster than they could follow, the ledge they jumped from shrunk behind them. They circled back and jetted over the heads of their friends. As the ledge disappeared in the opposite direction, Pete and Jason again turned toward their original heading.

Heath waved to them as they passed overhead. Pete looked to Jason and signaled. Simultaneously they pulled their levers and watched the landscape change from a frenzy to a blur. They flew so fast their screams of excitement were useless. Pete rushed forward as Jason curved left.

Jason came back around, brought his glider parallel to Pete's, and signaled.

Pete nodded in response.

They dove together and pulled up fast. Their gliders moved in unison, the noses reached upward, passed the axis, pulled them upside down, pointed down, then the tip of Pete's glider caught the back of Jason's.

A heavy rip and a sharp snap separated the gliders, and they plummeted down, crashed through the trees and rocks below.

The gliders broke, their bodies bounced.

Snow covered the valley beautifully.

Blood covered the rocks around them.

Jason moved his right arm. His left arm didn't respond. He felt his head. His helmet was gone, but it had lasted long enough to save his life. He pulled his hand in front of his face and rubbed the blood between his fingers.

Cautiously, he tried to push himself up but fell back to the ground. He looked around the rocks, saw Pete, crawled with one hand to his friend.

Pete's helmet tilted to the side, cracked. His neck was limp, his torso punctured by a rod from the glider. Jason touched Pete, and Pete's body shifted. His head tilted farther and touched his back.

Jason removed the helmet and cradled Pete's head in his good arm. Smoothed the hair out of his eyes. "Fate is a fickle fiend." Jason kissed Pete on the top of his head. "You win, my friend. You win."

∞

The old man finished his eggnog and looked over to the table with his clean, gray eyes.

"Grandpa, Grandpa Hesseman," said one of the children. "What happened? What happened to Jason?"

"Jason? Well, children, he grew up, married the woman he loved, had children, became a grandfather, then a great-grandfather, and gathered his family every year to celebrate Christmas."

A thin, beautiful, old woman with happy, green eyes walked in the door with a plastic container in her arm. She walked over to the old man and kissed the scar on his head. The old man began to stand, but she put another kiss on his mouth and a hand on his shoulder.

"I'll get it for you," she said and took his glass to the table. She spooned a ladle full of eggnog into the glass, added two ounces of whiskey, and returned to him. "And the neighbor made some cookies for you children." She opened the plastic container and passed the cookies to the children. "The kids will be back soon, then we can have dinner." She sat on her husband's lap and rested her head against his neck. "So what have you been doing?"

"Telling the children a Christmas story."

"You're so sweet. I love you."

"I love you too, Cilla."

The Great Potato War

Timothy's boat was a marvelous ship, sailed high and low in search of a slip. It was exquisite in taste and wonderful thing, for Timothy's boat was not an ordinary ship; it was a ship of all places. It could sail to places unknown. No one would ask if this was a ship of fools, because, in aspect, it was a ship of tools. With a mast of turbulent travel, it sailed through the sky, blown by the winds of a sun and a moon. I wish to be on Timothy's boat, with the sky as my sea and imagination as my wind.

The Pope of Instagnahple once said that it was come from the sky in a great ship of time, sent forth by gods to resurrect mankind. A ship which took on the form of a pyramid. It was one that carried the sailors of the universe.

Timothy was a photon beam, directed at eternity; he set out to blow away all other existence. For this task, he came to the planet Earth to recruit assistance for his mission. Here, he found a pedestal, a china plate, and a potato peeler. They were all unique individuals, set upon a duty of destiny. Boarding their ship, they sailed through the sky, into space.

"More rope!" shouted Finnigan, the china plate. It was a hectic day, with very little going right, as happens when you have a crew as such.

The rope was used to restrain the dolphins from eating satellites, as they went along, picking their way through the universe. A sudden stop brought them all to attention with the intensity of a baited soaper. Looking up at the intrusion, Joel, the potato peeler, said, "OH, NO! It's the Rabblerock; man the battle stations! We shall not be taken without a fight."

Martin, the pedestal, was on it at once. He sat behind the petrified armadillo, aiming with the eye of an apple. All at once, the Rabblerock opened fire, catching Timothy's crew unprepared. An egg struck the bow, and all hell broke loose. Satan came tumbling into their space, just as Martin was firing, and got hit by a flying squash. The Devil got so annoyed by this that he burst out in flame. Seeing the fire, the Rabblerock grabbed some marshmallows and set about roasting them. This was very fortunate, and Timothy and the others departed while everyone else was preoccupied.

Rounding a moon of, say, two hundred thousand squirrels, the boat once again was under way. A minor barrage of space garbage took out one of the dolphins, but overall, they made it without much harm done. Feeling the urge to become one with the peanut galaxy, Timothy set a course bearing zero-three-one. This course setting meant nothing at all to him, but it was the only one which made any sense.

Finding noteworthy paper, a large grape started a society based on Connie Chung, a hero to all grapes. This was a society which was prone to misinformation about anything and everything. Its first misconception was the belief that their neighbors, the Bottles of Wine, were harmless. Within an epsilon, the Bottles had the grapes converted and were corking them up, until it was time.

At this moment, Time was taking a vacation at Club Med and had no intention of having anything to do with a bunch of grapes, or even wine for that matter.

With Time out of the way, Timothy set his friends to the task of rounding up the squares. Now, squares are not all that easy to get a hold of, and they often go for a high price in some parts of the universe. When Joel had rounded the last one, they all took a break before starting to cube them. It was a difficult process, and the geometry involved was a bit too much for the pitchfork, who had committed suicide, before the others had joined on, by pretending to be a flower. He was immediately eaten by a very large, and quite unconventional cow. The cow later developed stomach problems and had to cut back on its iron.

Iron was another of the many interests of Timothy, who always considered himself a coin of many sides. Having no idea where he should start his next adventure, he flipped himself and wound up in small white room filled with tomato juice. Realizing he was not at all mentally well, he began building a space-reality modifier. It was to be a most extraordinary invention, and began simply with the touch of a lilypound. The major

problem with this, of course, is that a lilypond does not exist; therefore, it was a totally useless creation. Timothy scrapped this idea, when he remembered that he was a photon beam, and zapped himself back to his ship.

Slipping silently into the light, they weaved their way into uncharted female areas. The first is one which has no bearing on contemporary life and will not be considered at this moment. The other is to go along side of a Stinger 24 and jump down on the mushrooms, revealing the planet of beautiful women can openers. Oh yes, female can openers are an extra special sight. They are more stunning than a phaser on full blast, which could send you into oblivion, and they count like no other utensil I know.

A question was once asked of Timothy; it went like such: "Where are you going?" "Going?" asked Timothy. "Yes," replied the asker of the original question. "Well, you know, I don't believe it's where I'm going that matters, but the fact that I am just going," and he was gone.

A split second later, a nuclear explosion went off in test of atomic flexibility. Billions of miles away, Finnigan picked up the blast on his ultra-sensitive-dyno-reverberator and noted the distance and severity. Another blast in transmitter matter would send him back for good, and he wasn't quite ready for that. Last time a major blast came through, it almost wiped him out of existence altogether, so he was trying to be careful.

Thinking about what would be coming if he could escape the blast sequence, Finnigan programmed a semi-violet filter screen into his monitor. It would be very beneficial to be able to get true/false information on the galactic scanner. It was three days before the homecoming of Centurian Seven, and the ship was being redecorated for the festivities. Banners raced along the hallways in tie-dyed colors, exclaiming the glorious acceptance of tubular reality. Centurian Seven, whom Timothy's crew regarded as Eugene, would be bringing them all presents he had collected on his thirty billion light year journey. In Earth time, he had been gone approximately four and a half months, jet setting around space, in search of his lost tie clip. Being a clog was a tough life and often brought on many rude comments. Eugene did his best to ignore these comments, although sometimes he had to let the telemachus go on such bothersome creatures. It would be good to have him back.

Leaning back in his beansoup captain's chair, Timothy resolved the eternal question of, "How are you?" by creating a new and improved language of his very own. He was

very happy that Eugene would be back soon, and he was hoping Eugene would like the new improvements on the ship. Timothy had added a second keel and modified the rudder to cut field resistance when they were running at full power. All the interior rooms had been redecorated to match the occupant's interests. The onboard limpwrst had personally gone through to make sure the color schemes flowed together without too much of a clash.

Eugene's quarters had been set up in a mixture of old Swedish and contemporary styles. A yellow light filtered through the room, brightening the shoe rack with its faint glow.

Hurrying down the main corridor, Joel was very excited because he had just heard they were coming into a potato shower. Potatoes were his specialty, and it looked to make for a decent contrast to the normality of the day. Quickly preparing for the onslaught, he made his way to the lead battle station and got himself locked into position.

It was the biggest potato invasion Timothy had ever seen, and the odds were quite phenomenal. Potatoes the size of small planets were flying at them, ready to destroy the wondrous ship in an instant. It was a horrifying sight, watching those potatoes. Ten, no, twenty, no, thirty thousand potatoes were flying at them, each aiming its killer eyes right at the boat, approaching, prepared to pulverize the ship into little pieces of space scrap.

Their forces were strong, but the potatoes didn't know what they were going to face when they attacked Timothy's boat. It was a total massacre; Joel went nuts on the potato squad and fought them down to the very end. He sliced and slashed, twirled and twizzled. When the smoke had cleared, all that was left behind was an array of artfully designed french fries. It was a lucky thing Joel was a potato peeler.

Heading straight into the vector sector, Eugene caught up with the ship around lunchtime and made a surprise entrance. No one had detected him anywhere when he boarded the boat, because of an intricate cloaking device he had discovered on his travels. His arrival had been perfect, because he wanted to sneak up on his old friend, Timothy, and surprise him. They hadn't seen each other in four and a half months, and Eugene was determined to make a spectacular entrance. After all, what else can you expect from a clog?

Sipping a hot cup of tea, Timothy was taken by surprise when Eugene popped into the control room. It's a very comical sight, seeing a photon beam drinking tea, and even more so, seeing one almost spill his cup, as he tried to sit with dignity.

"Egad!" Timothy exclaimed, when Eugene appeared in the room. "Good God, man, you scared the bloody hell out of me."

"Nice to see you too, Tim, old buddy," Eugene responded. "I see you're still a bit too jumpy, as always."

"Well, I wasn't notified that you were here already. I was supposed to be told the moment you were spotted."

"No one ever saw me come in. I snuck past all your detection devices."

"But I have all the best equipment; it's impossible to get by."

"It would seem I have a few new tricks to show you, in that case. I picked up a few things when I was out scavenging the universe."

"Anyway, it's damn good to see you, Gene. Why don't you have a seat, and I'll pour you some tea."

"Sure thing, as long as the cups don't mind being used."

"These are null-life cups; they're inanimate objects, so don't you worry," Timothy explained, pouring out a second spot of tea.

They sat around and chatted the afternoon away, Eugene telling Timothy about all the wild life forms he had encountered out in the vast unknown regions of the universe, and Timothy telling his own stories of what had been going on, since they had last seen each other. It seemed that Eugene had indeed run into some pretty hairy situations out in space by himself.

One such time was when he had landed on a distant planet in the Surushi galaxy, about five hundred thousand light years from the Milky Way. The Milky Way had always amused Eugene; he could never figure out why they had named their galaxy after a candy bar. Well, when he was out in the Surushi galaxy, he had stopped on a planet called Mycrombint, a desolate wasteland with two and a half moons that almost always eclipsed the three suns daily.

When Eugene set down on this planet, he was in what appeared to be a deserted town. It looked to have been empty for about ten years. Genuinely interested, Eugene

started snooping around the shacks, trying to find out what these farmers had been like. When he was looking through a big, old farmhouse, he found a door leading into a small, secluded room. After getting inside the room, he found it to be very strange, indeeedoo.

Long, flat flashlights hung from the ceiling, giving off a dim, orange light. In the light, Eugene spotted a huge, metal table with a strange insignia engraved in it. It was the sign of a plethora of paranoids, boasting pictures of masked lookbacks, encircled by looping wolves, dancing in archaic sea stones. A lookback is exactly as it sounds: it looks back.

As Eugene looked up, he looked into the face of a lookback. Now, a lookback isn't something you want to just happen upon and meet.

As I have already mentioned, they are extremely paranoid, and that puts them on the edge all the time. Eugene looked into that face and was as scared as a weed on hoeing day. The twisted, demented looking lookback looked straight into Eugene's own little clog face, revealing a tortured past and neurotic psyche. Certain of his near demise, Eugene waited to meet his shoemaker.

As quickly as you could imagine, the lookback jumped forward with savage force, then fell to the ground, crying.

"Oh, this planet is just so horrible lately. You wouldn't believe how awful it is to live here. We don't have anything to do but harvest dust all day long. Day after day after day it goes on. There is nothing more to do, and I am very grateful to have your company. Living with a whole society of lookbacks gets extremely boring, and I have been sinking into a deep depression, down here, in this dark passage."

"Well, I'm very glad to meet you, sir," Eugene said, trying to figure the odds of meeting a lookback and not getting killed. "I'm presently just going around the universe, trying to learn as much as I can for the next few months."

"That's terrific!" the lookback said, settling down, into a chair. "It must be wonderful out there, finding all sorts of new life forms and experiencing the many different cultures that exist."

"I rather enjoy it. You know, I had always heard your kind don't like strangers very much and would just as soon kill one than introduce yourselves," Eugene confessed.

"That is mostly just rumor, although sometimes we lookbacks get on a mean streak and enjoy a good, hearty fight."

Discussing the many various subjects that clogs and lookbacks have to discuss, they sat for hours getting acquainted. Frederick, which happened to be the lookback's name, turned out to be a very nice fellow, actually, and pulled off a couple of semi-humorous jokes during their conversation. The best part was when Frederick decided to show Eugene the hidden room that was behind the one they were already in.

Pushing up the sliding wall, Frederick led the way into a brilliantly lit corridor. This wound around, until it brought them to a large, oak door, which was locked with an iron bolt. Behind this door, Eugene learned some of the secrets of the lookback race. These secrets are so secret that I cannot tell you exactly what they are, but I can tell you they are far more advanced than you might expect. They have combined magic and science into a splendid juncture of hyper-biochemically engineered pseudo placebos.

Eugene learned many useful things about stellar detection, all forms of combat, meditation, space travel, and so forth that day, as he sat, talking with a lookback in a barren dust farm.

As they sat and enjoyed their tea, which Eugene always had two sugars with his, Timothy listened to all of Eugene's wonderful tales about his travels. All at once, an alarm came on across the ship, and a warning blast out, over the intercom:

"TAKE COVER - LIFE FORM APPROACHING - DISBAND SHIP - REPEAT - DISBAND SHIP- LEVEL ONE ALERT- WE ARE ABOUT TO BE FOUND OUT!"

A woman in a fuzzy, pink bathrobe opens a drawer in her kitchen, and Joel, the potato peeler, slides back over to his slot, by the can opener. Finnigan, the china plate, jumps up, into the cupboard, above the stove. The woman turns around and says:

"Did you say something?"

"No, Mom, I didn't say anything," says a young boy, then goes back to eating his breakfast cereal.

Oh well, the woman thinks, turning back around. She looks down and mutters to herself, "Now, how did this pedestal and clog get in here?" and Timothy, the photon beam, flies out the window, sorry to have to leave his friends behind.

Her Peace

It soon became obvious that there was no more room for the cake in his dresser. By that time, Harold had found the keys to the sanitarium and was plotting a release of all the nuts in house. She waited silently at home, while her lover kept his brass bells in his pocket and tried to discover a sane route into the building. No fear was in him at the time because pure adrenaline continued to course through his veins as he mounted the wall. She fidgeted and played with the ends of her hair, not able to keep her mind off Harold's danger. Harold never stopped to think about what might happen to his lover, he only knew that she better not put the damn cake in his dresser again, or God help him, he didn't know what he would do.

Moisture made the walls slick, but Harold dug his fingers into the stone and pulled himself farther up toward the top. She kicked a ball of yarn and the hairless cat chased after it and tumbled around the room making one hell of a mess. Harold might be mad when he saw the mess, but it was out of her hands. Putting one leg over the top of the wall, he slipped into the darkened courtyard and slid behind the trees, making his way to the building. Finding a dimly lit back door, he pushed a key into the lock and cautiously turned the knob. It was frightful for her to think about it. She was never allowed to say anything Harold didn't like to hear. Searching through the corridors, Harold found a night watchman and silently took him out from behind. She knew he would be upset about the cat, maybe she should try to clean up. The cat knocked a vase onto the floor and it shattered, but the cat continued to chase the yarn around the room, not caring what was in his way.

Harold stripped the night watchman and put on the uniform. It was a bit too big, rent-a-cops are always somewhat overweight, but he made due and went back into the

corridor. Steaming some rice, she brought out the wok and put it over a small flame. Chicken catchetorie would taste good but an egg roll would better fit the moment. The cat bounced the ball of yarn off the back of the couch and it struck the window. Following the ball, the cat didn't bounce back as the yarn did, instead, he went through the window and ended up with a sharp blade of glass stuck in his throat. Harold wouldn't mind, he didn't really like the cat anyway; neither did she.

Harold found the master control room and looked at the controls that sat before him. She knew he would probably be successful, but she still worried as she ate her egg roll. Even if he wasn't successful, he would be happy about the cat. Harold found which controls opened the cell doors and which ones operated the lights. He pulled some switches. She poured some tea. The lights went out.

Harold pulled the other switch and all the patient doors unlocked. She put a spoonful of sugar and a dash of cream in her tea and sat on the couch. He took the guard's flashlight and spirited himself down the hall in search of some patients. It was doubtful that he could get them all out, but he was going to try his best. Soft music came on with the touch of a button, and she sat back on the couch again. Harold found the first group of brave inmates and told them who he was so they would not fear him and run back to their rooms or try to harm him. The patient who was leading the group recognized Harold and let the others know he was telling the truth and was there to help.

Weeping, she began to bake a chocolate and strawberry cake to help her pass the time she had to spend alone in that house. Finding the right door was not as easy as getting into the sanitarium, but it was done quickly nonetheless... and Harold dug for his keys to let them through it. She didn't like to cry and Harold didn't like to see her cry, so she tried to think about all the good Harold was probably accomplishing at the moment. It didn't help. All the keys for the trucks were hanging in plain sight inside the garage - amazing thing considering the fact that it was a fairly large sanitarium. Starting the engines, Harold found the most suitable drivers from their bunch and they prepared. As they were lifting the doors to leave the garage, one of the escapees threw a can of gasoline onto a counter and it tipped and spilled into an electrical outlet as it hit the wall. The worry was imprinted on her face as she constantly sat awaiting the return of her lover.

When Harold pulled the switch to unlock the patients' doors, he also threw another one that locked everyone else out of those hallways and inside the building. Most of the exits were locked with the electric manual controls Harold had used, so only few, if any, of the night employees would be able to come after them. As soon as they were out of the garage, they should be home free with enough time to be far gone before any police got close.

She started a fire in the modest fireplace that Harold had and sat calmly watching it take form. The electricity from the outlet ignited the gasoline and a small flame appeared as they were driving out of the garage. Barreling through the sanitarium yard, Harold and the asylum escapees quickly reached the gates leading outside the compound, and Harold jumped out and unlocked them with one of his many keys.

Carrying a large Afghan blanket down from upstairs, she clicked off the stereo and flipped on the television. In the firelight, she watched some irrelevant show with one eye and with the other she watched the fire. Harold led the brigade of loonies over the country roads that bled into darkness. No light shone from behind them any longer as the asylum disappeared behind the rolling hills. She forgot to set the timer and didn't remember her cake until she smelled the smoke that was beginning to fill the kitchen. Driving as fast as they could, the team of deranged escapees never saw the darkened blockade the county sheriff's office had set up in the middle of the road. She cranked the knob to OFF and pushed open the kitchen window to let the blackened smoke escape the room. One hundred yards before the brigade of escape loonies reached them, the sheriff's men turned on their lights in an attempt to get their prey to stop. Before the asylum went up in a full blaze, the employees had gotten to a phone and informed the police about the escape and now the police not only wanted them for escaping but also for the death of fifteen hospital employees.

Having aired out the kitchen, she went back into the living room and sat down. Putting a wet rag from the sink on her forehead, she leaned back and sipped her tea. The police lights came through the drizzle covered windshield, and Harold had to make a quick decision about what to do. The logs in the fireplace shifted as some of the wood burned away to coal. Harold stepped on the accelerator and went directly for the blockade. She let out a little nervous laugh. All the escaped patients followed Harold toward the blockade. Taking the rag from her forehead, she laid it on the end table. When

Harold was within ten yards of the blockade, the sheriff's men raised their guns and began to fire. POW! A piece of wood popped and made her jump a little, then she relaxed and knew everything was alright.