

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

[CHAPTER ONE: MONOZYGOTE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO: NEXT WEEK, KIDDO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE: MILK CARTONS](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR: DEATH IN THE LIFT & THE GYPSY'S CURSED CURSE](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE: ANGELACRES](#)

[CHAPTER SIX: THE REAPER'S DANCE CARD](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN: THE MELTING DOWN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT: STAND BY ME, LIE WITH ME, DIE WITH ME.](#)

[CHAPTER NINE: THERE ARE NO ACCIDENTS](#)

[CHAPTER TEN: SCHADENFREUDE](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN: A.J. THE CORRUPT COP](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE: RHODA'S SECRET TREASURE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN: A VERY IMPORTANT MAN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE GRIFTERS](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN: THE REAPER'S WALTZ . . . ALLEMANDE](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN: THE RESCUE](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: NOAH'S ARK](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: FIBONACCI](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN: THE TRUTH OF THE MIRRORS](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY: THE HOME MOVIES OF ROSE McALLISTER](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: SERA'S PLAN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: BEGINNING OF THE END](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: THE ENDING. \(ACTUALLY, THE FIRST ENDING.\)](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: THE ENDING. \(ACTUALLY, THE SECOND ENDING\)](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: AND FINALLY . . .THE THIRD ENDING](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

~~It started with~~ No. It *always starts* with the accent thing. Well, almost always. And yes, I left the “mistake” in there on purpose, because I figure the only way to write this is as a stream of consciousness—this brief intro, I mean. And to edit stream of consciousness too much (at all, really) seems somehow dishonest. For the purposes of this book, dishonesty simply will not stand. You absolutely must believe going into it, that this story is true. That everything you are about to read happened just as I have described.

But back to the accent thing. I’ve heard it all. “*You’re not from around here, are you?*” “*You’re not originally from the South, I’m guessin’? So, you’re from up north?*” “*Fargo. I’m definitely getting a Fargo vibe.*” “*Something tells me you’re not originally from Back Bay Boston?*” “*Are you foreign?*” “*What country are you from . . .no wait, let me guess.*”

If only they knew. Not only am I not from around here, this place, your town, your state, your geography—you might say I’m not even from “around” this century. Not even from “around” this time.

And yes, we thought of just making everything simple and going with some third person omniscient “Eye of God” narrator. Indeed, that would have been easier. But it wouldn’t have been honest. Although, technically, I’m not, *not* from this time. Worst of all (although that might be parsing it too

strongly), you aren't going to find out, in too much detail—very much at all about who I am. Frankly, that's out of my hands. Above my paygrade, to coin a phrase I hear around these parts.

Anyway, to make it third person omniscient would have been too easy, too pat. The fact is, I know what happened because I was there for a lot of it; that which I was not present for I got directly from the horse's mouth—another phrase I've heard around these parts, although it occurs to me that I have never actually heard a person who owns a horse or works with horses use that phrase.

I spell out who and what I am in dribs and drabs, as much as I was allowed, what with bosses and editors and legal permissions and such. Perhaps by the end, you will understand, albeit not with the clarity you might crave. I suspect the book will be dinged for that, but whatever. As for that third-person narrator stuff and all that University of Iowa Writers' Workshop advice, well, bugger it. We are, after all, talking Iowa. As for all those Pulitzers? Well, so yes, I am a little jealous. I am human, after all.

Well *technically*, I'm not—but I've already said too much.

CHAPTER ONE:
MONOZYGOTE

They were twins. Identical twins.

And this was their thing. Camping out. But the rules were very clear. Inviolable. They could only camp out as long as the electricity from the kite jar lasted. The electricity was stored in a kind of twenty-first century Leyden jar. Russell had first presented the project at a science fair when he was in elementary school, against a backdrop offering lengthy explanations on dollar store poster board, featuring giant pictures of Benjamin Franklin and Ewald Georg von Kleist, and Pieter van Musschenbroek, all looking on with profound gravitas. The whole thing was brilliant in its simplicity: it was a variation on the old story of Franklin, his kite, and a key. Then, just wait for the lightning bolt. Russell had actually figured out how to harness some of that electricity. And with that energy, he and his brother would camp out on Sugarloaf Mountain, a few miles out of town, cavorting until the electricity ran out.

Of course, they could have easily brought a generator along with them. Or they could have simply done it the way serious campers do, with no electricity at all. But that wasn't part of the game; that wasn't "their thing." Instead, they would go out at the first sign of a storm, set up the kites and keys and Leyden jars, then hunker down in an overly meshed and rubberized SUV, for protection—a sort of modern day Faraday Cage. Then, after the storm had passed, the brothers would gather up the jars full of electricity, and thus began the camp out—with blender drinks, hot dogs, tunes, video games, flicks, and a zero carbon footprint. It was a good time. It was the best of times.

They would usually meet in their respective cars at the foot of Sugarloaf Mountain, as it was a midpoint between their two abodes. On this particular Friday evening, Russell bounded out of his vehicle with even more verve than usual. Reginald noticed that his brother was holding a leash, attached to a little blob of fur that became clearer as Russell got closer.

"Isn't he great, Reggie? I got him from the animal rescue fair. Just look at him! Is that a face or what?"

Reginald cocked his head to one side and eyeballed the strange looking canine.

"It's a Bulldog-Pekingese mix," announced Russell. "He's a Bullingese!"

"What, like the spaghetti sauce?"

"No, not 'Bolognese'... 'Bull-ingnese'. That's why the poor dog has this horrible underbite and this jowly face. I think he looks fabulous. Everybody else thinks he's ugly; even the volunteers at the rescue were mocking him. But he and I are best friends now."

Reginald--"Reggie" to his friends-- was already down on the ground, offering his hand and scratching the happy dog behind the ears, envious of his brother. Always, always, he was envious of his brother.

“Maybe I’ll get one. I’ve been thinking about it.” Reggie stood back up, dusted himself off, and looked at the sky. “It’s getting dark. Let’s get going with the kites and jars.”

Russell nodded and they headed towards their usual spot, the dog trotting behind them eagerly.

“What’s his name?” asked Reggie, looking down at the strange canine.

“Hawking. Stephen Hawking.” Russell smiled and trotted faster as the clouds rolled over them. “Suits him, don’t you think?”

The evening lingered on uneventfully. At least as uneventful as an evening can be when it involves watching lightning bolts strike a jar containing a key lodged between two conductor rods. The science of it is not worth explaining here. Lay persons wouldn’t understand it, and scientists wouldn’t believe it. But within Russell’s world—a world that was burgeoning with every passing month at that fancy high-tech startup think tank—those scientists had to believe it, because they had seen it, and replicated it.

But no matter how many times they pulled off this amazing stunt, nothing could take away from the Frankensteinian thrill, just as good as the first time, that the brothers Russell and Reggie got when they captured lightning in a bottle and used it to fuel their weekend getaways.

No question, they were two of the nerdiest guys on the planet. They both knew it, and they had mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, it seemed to go with the territory. On the other hand, it had always made personal interaction with the fairer sex so awkward as to sometimes be physically painful. Although they were twins, Russell always seemed the more polished and mature of the two. Reggie always winced when people guessed Russell to be

several years his senior, when in fact they were monozygotic twins.

Technically, Russell was only seven minutes older than Reginald. But folks always thought that Russell was much older, and Reggie much younger, than their age of nineteen years. Both had enrolled in college early, and graduated from their respective ivy league universities in two short years; hence their early imprints on the world of professional science.

But Reggie felt neither resentment nor jealousy when it came to his older brother; rather he felt that they both had some great destiny, and each was the other's most favored and trusted counselor, especially in matters of science and invention.

The night passed slowly, and it was glorious. They feasted, imbibed, watched the latest remake of "Cosmos" (for like the hundredth time, man), and, in a naughtier vein, they watched "Star Whores: The Phantom Penis". Twice.

They were winding down with a couple of apple beers, and talking shop. (Which, for them, meant light, breezy topics like quantum tunneling, abiogenesis, and hydrostatic equilibrium.)

"So you're thinkin' micro-wormholes, huh?" mused Russell, belching slightly as he said it.

Reggie nodded without speaking, anxious to see what his brother would think.

"You talk to the professor about this?" asked Russell, handing Hawking another rib bone. Hawking was one happy dog.

"Of course."

"And he thinks the theory has merit?"

"That he does."

"I think it does too. I'd love to work on it with you, if you don't mind."

“Thanks. That would be great. Oh, and speaking of the professor, I took him a big plate of ribs and corn on the cob.”

“I’m sure he appreciated that, Reggie, under the circumstances.”

“Yeah. Under the circumstances.”

Russell studied his brother.

“Kid, I am damn proud of you, you know that?”

And then, after the conversation slowly faded, they went to sleep as they always did on these weekend nights: staring at the night sky, as the forest stillness swirled around them, wondering how long it would be until they got to those planets, and what they would do when they got there. .

Dawn came on like a Photoshopped picture of dawn; that was one of the reasons the boys spent so much time in these mountains.

They were gorgeous . . . they were God.

The twins rolled up their sleeping bags and took down the tent. They made sure the fire was out and packed up their duffel bags. Russell pulled his dog towards the car, and it followed, a little reluctantly.

“Man, Hawking loves it up here! So many more interesting smells than in the city. Animal-wise, at least.”

“Maybe one day we can build up here, like we talked about.” It came from Reggie, sounding more like a question than a statement.

“Yeah, Reggie. I think that sounds like a plan.” Russell loaded his things into his car. “Stop by to visit mom and dad after this?”

“Have we ever missed a Sunday?”

“O.K., Reg. See you there in twenty.”

And they both got in their cars and headed off.

The two of them stared at the grey headstones, clutching their collars closed, both without an umbrella. Reggie smiled sadly as the dog shook himself thoroughly, then he glanced over at his brother. “Why is it always raining, every single time we come to the cemetery? Has it ever not rained?”

“You have to admit it, Reg. The symbolism is perfect.”

“Russell, remember when you were dating that English major? You know, you never talked about symbolism before that. You never even referenced it or used the word. You say it an awful lot these days.”

Russell smirked at his brother.

“*‘There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’* Shakespeare. Hamlet.”

“*‘There are more things in your philosophy than are dreamt of in heaven and earth.’* Berkeley. Bumper sticker.” Reggie chuckled at his retort, and his brother chuckled too.

Reggie was always proud when he could make his brother laugh. His brother laughed often enough, but rarely at Reggie’s prompting. Perhaps that was because (Reggie secretly knew), Russell was always very worried about what would become of his “little” brother.

They both studied the headstones silently, just as they had almost every Sunday since the accident.

“Reggie, do you think about them a lot?”

“Only every single day. Sometimes every hour.”

“Yeah. I hear you.”

“Rus, do you hate the guy for it?”

“What, the drunk driver? What would be the point? He died instantly. I guess he’s wherever people go who wreak havoc on innocent people.”

“Yeah. Still, you know what I always think of? I always think of how when we were kids, we were obsessed with time travel.”

“Ha. Yeah, I remember. We found that old washing machine in the dump near the house. We didn’t tell Mom and Dad, ‘cause we thought they would think we would suffocate in it or get locked in and be found months later, just a bag of bones.”

“But we didn’t care. One of us would climb into the dryer with dad’s old walkie talkie--”

“And the other one would go over to the abandoned bullet trailer --”

“And we’d pretend we were the international space station, and the pod was traveling through a wormhole--”

“Yeah, and then we always stole lighter fluid--”

Before Russell could finish, Reggie erupted, upset as though the wound was brand new.

“DAMMIT! If we could just have done that . . . exactly that. . . if we could have jumped ahead, for one quick glimpse of the future . . . we could have saved mom and dad. We could have saved them . . .”

“Kid, how many times have I told ya? Woulda, shoulda, coulda . . .it gets you nowhere.”

Reggie nodded, beaten. Beaten by physics, beaten by life.

“Dammit, Rus, it’s just—oh, I’m babbling. But if we have to go through this stupid travesty called life, couldn’t we at least all be born with expiration dates or something?”

“Ha! Do you mean like milk cartons? Like the expiration date on a milk carton? Oh hey, I’m not laughing at you, kid. It’s just a funny idea, that’s all. Reggie, you gotta give this grief thing time.”

“It’s been five years.”

“Maybe you just gotta learn to live with the pain, then. You know, kid, when I do things in the world, I like to think I am doing the things that dad wanted to get done. You know, all those crazy projects he had on his plate.”

“You’re right, Rus. You’re right. There are just so many things I’d like to talk to him about. And you’ve accomplished so much, it kills me that he is not here to see it.”

“Oh, he sees it, kid. He sees it.”

Reggie looked at his brother, taken aback.

“This? From my brother, the scientist? My Replicate-the-Results-or-it-ain’t-Science brother?”

“An open mind, kid. Keep an open mind.”

Hawking got up, walked over, and peed between the headstones, managing to hit them both. The brothers just shook their heads simultaneously, like a pair of bobblehead dolls. Suddenly Russell brightened.

“Say, speaking of crazy projects, I gotta go. I have to go pick up these new Oculus Rift goggles that Jeremy wants me to beta test.”

“The generation Z-6 model you’ve been bragging about? The ones with olfactory immersion? Coo-wal! Can I give ‘em a try?”

“I don’t know . . . it’s all very top secret.” He watched his brother’s face fall.

“Cripes, Reggie, I’m kidding. Of course, you can. But I gotta go, I was supposed to meet him in five minutes. Walk with me and Hawking back to the parking lot?”

“Rus I think I’ll just stay here and talk to mom and dad for a while.”

“Alright, kid. See you back here, same time, next week?”

“Absolutely, same time next week.”

“And after, we’ll go to that place with the chicken wing cheesecake.”

“Don’t you mean ‘chicken wings and cheesecake’?”

“No, it’s chicken wing flavored cheesecake, it’s all the rage.”

“Whatever you say, Rus. Sounds awfully metro-male for my brother.”

“Next week, kiddo. Right here. See you then.”

He watched his brother and Hawking amble through a thick grey mist, until they disappeared into the rolling fog. Reggie turned back to study the graves, and talked to himself as he cried quietly:

“An expiration date. Would that be so much to ask of a Higher Intelligence?”

If only he had thought of it five minutes sooner, before his brother had departed. And wouldn’t you know it, his phone was dead. Cell phones were always the last thing on their minds when they were camping. Reggie needed a special volume of his father’s notes for a project he had in mind, and Russell had them all at his place.

As much as he hated navigating the city on a Sunday, Reggie turned his car in the direction of the bridge into downtown, muttering at the traffic. It took him ten minutes to get a mile, but he was pleasantly surprised to see none other than Russell ambling down the street, cell phone in one hand, pen in the other, and those iridescent green Oculus Rift goggles covering his face so completely that he looked like Ant-Man.

Reggie honked, yelled, and waved as his brother turned and came walking his direction on the sidewalk. Suddenly, a disoriented Russell stepped

off the sidewalk and staggered in front of Reggie's car. The front bumper knocked Russell down, Reggie screeched to a stop--

--As a mob rushed around the mangled and bloody body in the middle of the street, Reggie gripped the steering wheel, paralyzed. He didn't have to rush to the body to know that he had just killed his own brother.

CHAPTER TWO:
NEXT WEEK, KIDDO

The rest of the day was a blur. It was even more horrific than that wrenching visit from the state troopers who informed the brothers that their parents had been killed by a drunk driver, and on Christmas day no less. Reggie did not think that there could be a day more horrible than that one, but this day surely was—if such things are in fact quantifiable—because it was *he* who had run his own brother down.

His brother Russell had died instantaneously. There had been dozens of witnesses, and there was no question that it was poor Russell's own fault, lost as he was in the world of a defective Oculus Rift. Nobody would ever know exactly what the world looked like to Russell in that moment when he heard his brother calling out for him and waving. Nor would anybody ever know what Russell's own death looked like to Russell, in those final few seconds . . . his brother's impeccably restored cherry red 1958 Plymouth Fury barreling towards him, as a disoriented Russell staggered into traffic. (Ironically, the

gorgeous vehicle was Russell's graduation present to his brother, when Reggie had graduated at the top of his class and given a rousing valedictorian speech.)

Reggie was in no way to blame--that was beyond question, thanks to the horrified crowd of strangers who had witnessed the whole thing. The police and EMTs were terribly nice about everything, and Reggie was whisked away in an ambulance before he could run to his brother's mangled form and hold Russell one last time.

Reggie did not stay at the hospital for very long. He knew that there was nothing wrong with him, and although the doctors wanted to keep him overnight for observation, Reggie would have none of it. He ripped off the monitors and tubes and wires; then he grabbed his clothes and dressed quickly and was out the rear exit before you could say "Oculus Rift". He knew what he had to do. He had to go see the professor.

He ran and ran, like a crazy person he ran, through the crowded throngs packing the sidewalks. It wasn't as though the professor could do anything for him, in a practical sense. Reggie's brother was dead, and now he had no other family in the world. His grandparents were all dead. Both of his parents had been "only children", so there were no aunts and uncles. There was nobody left for him in the world. Nobody.

But even if the professor couldn't bring Russell back, he always had a way of saying things in a comforting way.

Reggie got to the overpass and started stumbling his way down the grassy embankment leading to the world under the freeway. Shopping carts crowded together like bumper cars at a carnival, and the smell of the place might have been vomit inducing, to the uninitiated. Reggie darted and dashed

his way past the hodgepodge of tents, boxes, lean-tos, and other makeshift housing. He finally got to the green camo tent, its front flaps tied wide open as though its tenant was expecting visitors. Before he knew it, he was in the professor's arms, sobbing like a baby. The grizzled homeless man held him hard and close, yet rocked him as though he was a fragile newborn.

"I know, kid. I know. Sammy came back from his corner and told me what happened. I went up to look for you, but the ambulance had already taken you away. I was afraid they'd kick me out of the hospital. Plus I knew you'd show up here."

Reggie was still crying, staring at this man, this mentor, now the closest thing he had to a father. The professor had a crazy shock of red, unkempt hair and beard. His skin was the color of buttermilk, with a constellation of freckles, and everyone who met him was taken aback by his piercing green eyes.

Reggie started babbling, stream of consciousness, the professor listening intently and only occasionally interjecting a comment when the pauses between Reggie's effusions became too awkward and unbearable. As the long and winding conversation meandered and bubbled up like a stream in the woods, some bittersweet memory or horrific image would leap to life, sending Reggie into new gales of weeping, and the professor continued to hold him close.

At one point, a particularly creepy man poked his head in and smiled, showing the few remaining teeth that his meth habit had not robbed him of--this toothless turnabout being fair play, as he himself had robbed so very many. The derelict's eyebrows arched high and his whole face lit up in some twisted, cirrhotic yellow glow.

“Hey, professor, is that kid here to work? I could use some serious pleasure, man. I mean, you know, ‘cause I got a twenty burning a hole in my pocket.”

Suddenly a look of rage such as Reggie had never seen flooded over the professor’s face; his visage became red and his eyes were wild.

“YOU ASSWIPE, THE KID JUST LOST HIS BROTHER!”

And with that, the professor picked up a small brown paper bag and heaved it at the derelict. The bag split wide open and fresh, redolent feces splattered all over the man’s face, dripping down onto his clothes. Even Reggie was, for a moment, yanked out of his grief.

“SHIT, MAN, YOU DIDN’T HAVE TO DO THAT!” yelled the derelict, removing an old washcloth from his pocket and wiping away the mandung. “YOU ARE FUCKING CRAZY, YOU KNOW THAT, PROFESSOR? IT'S GETTING SO TWO MEN CAN’T HAVE A CIVIL EXCHANGE ABOUT COMMERCE ANYMORE!”

And suddenly the derelict was gone, off to wash himself in the gully. Reggie stared at the professor, squinting his eyes and taken aback.

“Did you just throw a bag of feces at that man?”

“Damn straight. You gotta take care of yourself. It’s a jungle down here. I’ve become known as the crazy man who throws shit at you if you get outta line with me. And when that happens, folks tend to leave you alone.”

“I guess.”

“Especially, kid, because a lot of these guys don’t have a very extensive wardrobe. And if you smell like shit, nobody will approach you to give you a handout. Panhandling is largely about hygiene.”

“Whatever. So are you telling me that you stockpile little bags of your own poop to ward off interlopers?”

“Hey, if it ain’t broke.”

“Professor, you are a very strange person, you know that?”

“Hey, I adapt. ‘Adapt or die,’ that’s my motto.” And with that, the professor pulled a gold pocket watch from inside his jacket. Reggie’s eyes grew wide.

“I’ve never seen that before, professor. That’s beautiful.”

“Family heirloom. My great-great-grandfather brought this with him to America when he came from Ireland. Only thing he had of any value. He had to pawn it not long after he got here because he couldn’t find work. The city did not like the Irish at that time. But my great-great-grandmother pawned her tortoise shell hair comb, the only thing she had of any value, to get it back for him.”

“Isn’t that a famous story?”

“Only because my great-great-grandfather told it to some x-jailbird in Pete’s Bar in exchange for free drinks.”

The professor winked at Russell and turned to his crate of food.

“Want I should make us some dinner, kid?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Russell just stared at the professor, who was poking around in his box of cookware. “Say professor, uhm, how is the research going? I mean, are you any closer to—”

Suddenly the professor’s nostrils flared and his eyes got crazy.

“Don’t go there, kid. Tonight is about you. Don’t go there . . .”

Who could explain it--but when Reggie left, later that night, after a hearty meal of hobo stew, he actually felt better. Infinitesimally better, but better.

That was the professor. That was the way of him.

Just because the two brothers had no family did not mean that Russell's death was not felt deeply in certain circles. For while Reggie led a much more solitary life (suffice it to say that the projects he was working on were fantastical and ethereal, requiring private time and effort), Russell had managed to mainstream himself, working as a consultant to that prestigious new upstart think tank, MC Squared. All of his buddies from work were shocked and heartbroken at the news of his death, and it was that particular crew of friends and colleagues who took care of the funeral arrangements.

Money was not a problem, not for them and not for Reggie. Reggie's father had been somewhat obsessed with life insurance, so Reggie was very comfortable in that respect. At the very least, this completely broken man-child with no family left on this earth would never have to worry about money.

But so completely devastated, so emotionally eviscerated was Reggie by his brother's death—and the horrible reality of he himself having caused it—that Reggie couldn't even face the most basic questions, like contacting a funeral home, choosing a headstone, creating a service, writing an obituary. The burial spot was preordained: their parents had purchased a large family plot many moons ago, when the family was young, and full of health and hope. Their father's decision to buy a family plot had been seen by many as premature, paranoid, and anal retentive.

But everything else about the funeral, all of the other painful details, were handled by Russell's friends, as Reggie sat in his bleak little apartment, in a weepy stupor.

Finally the day of the funeral came. Several of Russell's friends came around to collect Reggie, and they all made sure that someone was by his side

every step of the way. The funeral was every bit as sad as you would imagine it to be, and it would only be deflating in the extreme to recount it in detail here.

Suffice it to say that the headstone was marvelous. A real work of art. A friend in the group who was an amazing sketch artist did a picture of Russell laughing with Einstein, and he got both of their faces just right. They had worked with another artist to get it etched in the marble, and it was perfect. The headstone also included Russell's favorite quotation from Einstein:

The finest emotion of which we are capable is the mystic emotion. Herein lies the germ of all art and all true science. Anyone to whom this feeling is alien, who is no longer capable of wonderment, and lives in a state of fear, is a dead man. To know that what is impenetrable for us really exists and manifests itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, whose gross forms alone are intelligible to our poor faculties – this knowledge, this feeling ... that is the core of the true religious sentiment. In this sense, and in this sense alone, I rank myself among profoundly religious men.”

But this had not been enough for Reggie. Russell's second favorite quotation, also Einstein, was carved on the back of the headstone:

“The further the spiritual evolution of mankind advances, the more certain it seems to me that the path to genuine religiosity does not lie through the fear of life, and the fear of death, and blind faith, but through striving after rational knowledge.”

Yes, it was all a bit wordy, as epitaphs go, but as we have said, money was no object. And after all—this was, in fact, Russell's last chance to

communicate to the world. Might as well be a bit long-winded. And it was, after all, from the mouth of the master.

Standing there in the rain as the service droned on (nerds were not always the best public speakers), Reggie remembered the few times his brother had waxed on about God, startling Reggie with the possibility of believing in religion: *“If you say there’s no evidence of God, then you’re missing the stars in the sky and you’re missing the sunrises and sunsets and you’re missing the fact that bees pollinate all these crops and keep us alive and the way that everything seems to work together. Everything just sort of works together in a way that to me suggests intelligent design.”* Remembering that Russell had said this, Reggie found himself wondering if his brother was truly in a better place. . .

Reggie snapped himself back into the moment, studying the words on the headstone. Powerful stuff. But it was not just this powerful Einstein quotation that made the headstone so dramatic. There was a crowning touch. The guys had all chipped in and sprung for a huge, magnificent stainless steel model of an atom to be mounted on top of the headstone. It would have pleased Russell profoundly. Everybody agreed that the gigantic atom perched atop the headstone seemed to say it all.

The funeral service was a blur to Reggie, much as the entire week had been. It wasn’t that he couldn’t accept his brother’s death; rather, *it was that he could*, and now he had to try and imagine a world without his brother in it. Reggie had always thought of himself as a person of extraordinary imagination; that was, in point of fact, why he had not made as much overt progress as his brother. Russell was all goals and linear thinking and deadlines, Reggie darted from theory to notion to idea to hypothesis like a water bug on a pond—and it was, in fact, Russell who had helped to hone

Reggie's ideas down into something that one might create a plan for pursuing in the real and available world.

Reggie was not beyond embracing the irony of symbolism: it had rained all day. It had been showering when he woke up, and the storm had picked up in intensity as he put on his black suit and got ready for Russell's friends to come pick him up. And as if that was all not melodramatic enough, it had been thundering all through the sad graveside service.

Another service was taking place about a hundred yards away, and several dozen black umbrellas all went up on cue, as though choreographed. The umbrellas around Russell's grave were more scattered in this collection of eggheads; some had grabbed umbrellas at the last minute, probably from roommates and girlfriends and wives, and the umbrellas were strangely festive, with their rainbow colors and chipper patterns. It all seemed very bizarre and out of place. Also, Reggie could have sworn that he saw the professor, sad and raggedy, watching from a distance on the far side of the cemetery. But when Reggie squinted for a closer look, the figure had vanished into the mist.

Finally the crowd dissipated, and Reggie resisted all urgings to come along with the group to a safe and warm place where they might celebrate and remember the amazing life of Russell Albert MacIntosh. But Reggie declined.

What he really wanted was to be here alone with his brother for these last few minutes. . .

. . .For along with the ocean of sadness that was sloshing around everybody on that stormy day, there was a bolt of rage cutting through it all: ***"Next week, kiddo. Right here. See you then."*** These were the precise words

that his brother had uttered, exactly a week ago. What the hell was with cruel fate, that the words had to have come horribly true in a way that neither one of them could have imagined at the time?

Reggie stared at the steel coffin, trying to wrap his mind around the fact that his brother was dead inside of it. And no Dr. Frankensteinian miracle was going to bring him back, lightning or no lightning. Reggie could not get out of his mind the discussion they'd had here a scant week ago: "*If only we could know the date of our death. . .*" How much more passionately we would live! How much less time we would fritter away! His brother had joked with him: "*You mean like milk cartons? Like the expiration date on a milk carton?*" And then Russell had said not to feel bad, he was only teasing Reggie.

Suddenly Reggie felt as alone as he ever had in his entire life. Yes, the other funeral party was still going on, but it seemed to be a mile away, hidden in the fog, and Reggie felt that he would now go through the rest of his life like this. Alone. Misunderstood. Afraid. Scattered. Imagining too many things at once, too off-putting to get the help he needed. And whose fault was this?

"GODDAMMIT!" he shrieked, "WHY'D YOU HAVE TO WEAR THOSE STUPID GOGGLES IN MIDTOWN?"

Though his own volume and rage shocked the hell out of him, he kept ranting on:

"STUPID BROTHER! HOW CAN YOU LEAVE ME LIKE THIS?" And then Reggie kicked the headstone as hard as he could. He hurt his foot badly, and this made him yell and curse even more. He was now garnering the attention of the other funeral service across the way. Reggie was crazed with grief; he kicked the headstone over and over again, then grabbed the giant steel atom and screamed "*WHYYYYYYYY!*"

In that instant, a thunderbolt jerked down from the stormy sky, zagged through the clouds, tore through the trees, and then jabbed directly into the headstone atom, making a crazy blue pattern over all the shining stainless steel: the electricity shot from the atom right into Reggie's hands, which were gripping the atom crazily. Reggie was thrown backward and into the grave, and he was left sprawling against the coffin, after first hitting his head on it, good and hard.

He was blue. No breath.

Surely he must be dead, thought the members of the other funeral party, as men sprinted towards the kid's body while the women staggered behind, their heels making divots in the perfect grass.

Perhaps it was a miracle, perhaps it was luck, or perhaps it was divine intervention from that mysterious Higher Power—but Reggie was not dead.

One man who said he was a doctor provided mouth-to-mouth, and after a terrifying few moments, Reggie blinked his eyes and gasped hard for air, much to the delight of the terrified crowd of strangers.

Reggie helped himself up to a sitting position, staring at this throng of wellwishers, some of whom were praying under their breath, others crossing themselves.

And that is when Reggie noticed:

Every single one of them had numbers floating over their heads.

And it was unmistakable. These were dates. They had to be dates. As Reggie scanned the space above their skulls, he saw a whole range of dates

07/14/2079. 03/04/2045. 01/05/2096. And so on. And so on.

Reggie knew immediately what it was.

It was their Date of Death.

He was staring at a bunch of human milk cartons. And these were their expiration dates.

CHAPTER THREE:
MILK CARTONS

As folks helped him to his feet, Reggie tried not to stare at the numbers dancing above their heads. He could be wrong, after all, he told himself. But what else could it be, then? Birthdays? Retirement ages? His wandering thoughts came into sharp relief when the sound of a man and woman bickering in the distance, over by the other grave, suddenly spiked, and all heads turned towards them.

“The deceased was his x-wife,” explained a man dressed in a black raincoat and bowler. “The one he’s arguing with is his fiancé. She’s upset about how upset he is about his x’s death. Jealous, even of the dead. Sad, isn’t it?”

Reggie nodded absently, as the furious fiancé huffed away from the young man, heading in Reggie’s direction. The young man, out of place in his leather biker jacket, stomped after her.

And that is when Reggie saw it. The numbers above the man's head were large and blood red, and they flashed on and off like a neon sign.

"Holy crap," Reggie said, and stared in disbelief:

It was today's date.

Only another few seconds of bickering transpired before the young man stomped away from his fiancé, who bellowed for him to come back. But he was done with her. He jumped on his motorcycle and screeched off down the shaded cemetery path; then he burned rubber as he turned onto the street and sped around the corner.

The sound of the crash froze every mourner in their tracks. Then they all ran in the direction of the noise, screaming and jabbering, many grabbing their cell phones to call 911.

But Reggie knew it was pointless. Walking slower than the rest of the crowd was a slight, elderly woman who was leaning on the arm of a young man who appeared to be her grandson. He was helping her towards their car. This time, it was Reggie's turn to freeze. She, too, had today's date hovering over her black hat.

Reggie's head was still reeling from the lightning strike. He actually could not believe that he himself was not dead. Was he hallucinating all of this? He knew what he must do. The elderly woman was being escorted to an impeccably kept black Buick. Two other relatives joined them.

Reggie trotted over to his car on the far side of the parking lot, pulled out, and started to follow them. The driver purposely drove away from the scene of the motorcycle accident, driving slower than the speed limit and obeying all traffic signs. There were two other passengers and the driver in the car along with the old woman; they were clearly being very protective of

her. Reggie was directly behind them now, studying the people in the car. After a few blocks, he noticed signs of panic inside the car. It was hard to tell exactly what was happening, but the driver began speeding down the street. Reggie decided to risk a ticket and followed close.

So close was he following, that he had to slam on his brakes when the Buick took a sharp turn into the emergency drop off lane of a hospital. Reggie screeched into the adjoining lot, parked, and jumped out. By the time he had sprinted to the emergency entrance, the old woman was strapped to a gurney, and a nurse was taking information from the grandson, who was nervously babbling answers to questions:

“Agatha Templeton ... she’s eighty-seven years old ... she just started wheezing and grabbing her chest, so we brought her here.”

Reggie hung back, keeping his distance. The last thing he wanted was to get kicked out of the hospital. He jotted her name down on a piece of paper, thinking that he might forget it. He still didn’t understand how his own brain was functioning at all.

And then, it hit Reggie. His eyes bulged and he felt weak in the knees. What number was hovering above *his* head? He bolted to the closest men’s room and ran for the nearest mirror, terrified of what he might see. He stared, unblinking.

Nothing.

Nothing. Not a year, or a month, or a day. Not a single digit. Reggie could only put it off to the fact that whatever strange new cursed gift this was, it could not be seen in a mirror. He heard a toilet flush and a beefy man, liberally tattooed, came out of a stall. Reggie hesitated, then gave it a shot:

“Hey sir, I was just wondering. Can you see anything over my head?”

Tattoo man gave Reggie precisely the look you would expect.

“What?”

“Uh, not to bother you ... I just got hit by a bolt of lightning, see, and I was wondering if you see anything floating above my head? Numbers? Or anything in the mirror?”

“Look, pal, the only thing I see above your head is the reflection in the mirror of some bathroom graffiti that says Fuck Farmasutical companies, which I agree with by the way, now do you need anything else, pal, or can I use the hand blower?”

Reggie muttered a thank you, and gave himself another glance in the mirror. It was not as though he'd ever imagined that he would live forever. Reggie shrugged awkwardly at his reflection. Then he hurried out into the waiting room.

If Reggie had been thinking more clearly, he might have entered the ER with a better plan. Or he might have just kept his eyes staring at the floor and hurried to the exit. But he was determined to see what had happened to the old lady from the cemetery, so he made his way from the ER towards the elevator, planning to find the ICU.

He barely made it through the sea of bodies, some moaning, others babbling incoherently. There were bodies on stretchers and people slumped in chairs, experiencing varying degrees of discomfort. There was blood and gashed skin and protruding bone; there were curses rising all around him--from the most genteel of folk, to the rough ridden souls of the night.

And, of course, there were the deadly digits: a shocking number of them were imminent. There were those with today's date, and some for the next day. There were days ranging from this week to next month. A few,

Reggie noticed with some small shred of relief, were for a very long time in the future. He felt he needed some air; maybe he could go out into the land of the living and breathe in a slew of numbers indicating dates fifty years from today. But just as he was thinking that was exactly what he would do--

--the elevator doors opened, and the people from the funeral Buick came out. They were weeping into hankies; two men were holding the arms of two women as they spoke in low tones: "She had a good life . . . she basically raised Connie, and I think losing her granddaughter was just too much . . . you heard the doctor say she didn't suffer . . . she was in her eighties, after all, and her health was declining. . ."

Reggie leaned against the wall and tried to decide his next move. Suddenly he knew what he must do.

The elevator dinged and the door opened onto the obstetrics floor. Reggie hurried over to the window and looked at the rows of newborns, some asleep, some gurgling happily. He beamed as he stared above their heads.

Reggie was beginning to intuit that the numbers had a kind of prognosticatory personality to them; these digits were all a pleasing, cliché pink or baby blue. And the numbers were exactly what Reggie had hoped to see. There were all manner of months and days, but the years were a satisfying range: 2117. 2098. 2122. The news was good. And on and on the good news went—until Reggie's eyes froze on three babies at the very end of the row: obviously triplets, based on their matching hats and the name cards at the end of their bassinets. And then, he saw the numbers above their wee pates: 01/01/2035. And then the next one: 01/01/2035. And the next one: 01/01/2035.

Oh my God, screamed his brain, as he realized that none of them would even see their tenth birthday. Some ghastly accident, he thought . . . then,

before he knew what was happening, Reggie was doubled over and vomiting into the nearest trash can. Suddenly, nurses were hovering.

“Let’s get you a gurney.”

“We just need to fill out a little paperwork.”

But before they could make a move, Reggie was headed out the door, down the fire stairs, and back out into the terrifying city, the deathly digits lolling above the heads of the crowd all around him. He tried to ignore the numbers and their meaning—especially the more alarming, imminent dates. He pushed through people, heading down alleys and side streets, running in the direction of the river.

He had to get to the professor.

The events of the last few hours came tumbling out of Reggie’s mouth, in an incoherent but spellbinding story. The professor had never known Reggie to be hysterical, delusional, or otherwise weird. Reggie was just your garden variety geek. Almost boring, you might say. The professor found himself saying to himself that he just could not believe it, this strange story that his young friend was telling. And yet, he couldn’t *not* believe the kid. He groped for something to say to Reggie. Reggie was staring back at him with the most imploring of expressions, as though this brilliant mentor of his must surely, *surely* have the answers.

“OK, OK,” said the professor, leaning back on the filthy overpass wall and staring off into space. “OK. What if . . . uhm. Here’s what it could be. What if the date of our death is coded into our DNA? Yeah! Yeah, that’s it. We’re learning more and more about the secrets of DNA all the time. And

how factors, genetic and whatever, impact life span. It only makes sense that the date of our death is buried down in there, somewhere, in the good old deoxyribonucleic juicy juice. And somehow, from that crazy atomic electrical charge you got at the cemetery, you are tapping into other folks' DNA. That could happen. I mean hell, things that are commonplace now seemed like witchcraft five hundred years ago. Yes, Reggie, by God, that's it! Gene .! We know that genes can send electrical impulses to each other, in a nanosecond, containing all kinds of amazing information. And you, my friend, have a front row seat!"

Suddenly the professor leapt to his feet, having his Eureka moment.

"I feel like Archimedes! Or you should. Kid, you have found a way to drill into the deepest part of our physical hardwiring! The DNA. And in doing so, you have discovered the ultimate secret of human life. Or death. But this amazing--"

"--Not so amazing," Reggie replied quietly. "At least not DNA-wise. Professor, no DNA knows if somebody is going to get hit by a bus or shot by a mugger or walk off a cliff because they're staring at their genius phone."

The professor looked crushed.

"Oh. Yeah. Yeah. Bummer. That was a beautiful moment. Well--OK, I have another idea. Maybe this is it. Every intelligent soul on the planet knows that there is life on other planets. So maybe these aliens out there, on some distant rock, these super-intelligent beings, maybe we earthlings are just like some rats to them in a massive cage, this pretty biome prison, and they can see the date of our deaths, and they think it would be this great experiment to let one of us--or hey, maybe there is more than one of you, maybe you seers are dotted around the planet, for comparison purposes--and the aliens think it is fascinating and hilarious to see how people react when they find out the date of their death! I mean, who among

us wouldn't behave completely differently than we normally do, if in fact we knew such a thing? Am I right? I mean, cripes--people who knew they would die next week or next year would treat every minute like a precious gift. Or who knows, maybe they would go nuts and start acting all self-destructive, since they knew it was pointless anyway. And that's the experiment, see? Yes, the aliens would love that. And the people who knew their deaths were far in the distance would become incredibly reckless, because they--WHAT?"

Suddenly the professor stopped talking. He stared at Reggie, his eyes wide. Reggie smiled ever so slightly.

"See, professor. That's how I know you are a true genius. Your brain is way out there, conjuring theories and considering all the wild possibilities. You're more curious and worried about the planet than you are about your own self. Although I figured sooner or later, you'd have to ask. And the answer, sir, is far out. Your date is way far out there. Way far."

"Really?"

"Really. Medical science must have something up its sleeve, professor."

"I guess. Wow. Wow."

"But sir, the aliens theory. How can aliens know the future?"

"I don't know--maybe the aliens are from the future. Or maybe they are humans from the future, traveling back in time to write their dissertation. "Quote. Reification of the Grim Reaper: Semicolon. Impact of Date-hyphen of-hyphen Death Foreknowledge on Decision Making, comma, Risk Taking, comma, and the Butterfly Effect period. End quote."

"Ha! Professor, that sounds *exactly* like a dissertation title."

“Lord knows I’ve read enough of them. I’m sure that even in the distant future, dissertation titles will be required to contain extraneous colons and hyphens.”

They fell silent for a moment. Reggie leaned back next to the professor, finding it fleetingly odd, as he always did, that he felt so comfortable in these surroundings, hunkered down among the homeless of the sprawling city. Suddenly, Reggie perked up. The professor sat up and stared at him.

“What? WHAT?”

“Oh no, Professor! Digits flashing red!”

“Who? WHO?”

“Army jacket, long greasy black hair, muttering to himself.”

“You mean he--”

The angry man had stomped by them and was now at the far end of the encampment. He was confronting another man about everything at once: meth deals, betrayal, cash, larceny, his old lady, something about a ride somewhere. Fuck you and fuck off and fuckhead and motherfucker. The usual robust social intercourse generated when drugs, females, and money are involved. There was a scuffle, and the angry man fell backward into the river, blood oozing from his chest.

The professor turned and stared at Reggie. After a long, strange silence, it was the professor who broke the stillness.

“Well, kid, I suppose the next step is to tackle the great, cosmic question: if you warn people about when they’re going to die, can we prevent their deaths?”

Reggie lit up.

“Yeah. Yeah! I mean, that thought ran through my head on the way here, of course. But what if they know the date, but they can’t avoid it? Or,

you know, what if they don't die that particular day, the date I see over their heads--but their death happens anyway, and soon. You can't cheat death, the Grim Reaper will have his way, and all that. So they don't die in a car accident, but someone pushes them in front of a subway. Or they don't get killed in a home invasion, but they electrocute themselves while making a smoothie, or some such ridiculous way to go. Man, that would make a great movie. Wouldn't that make a great movie? A franchise even, seeing as there must be a million ways to die. . .”

The professor just stared at Reggie, scowling slightly.

“Kid. You need to get out of the house more.”

CHAPTER FOUR:

DEATH IN THE LIFT & THE GYPSY'S CURSED CURSE

Comic-con was going to be hell for Reggie. But he knew he had to go. He and Russell had gone every year since he could remember. Even back when the twins could barely walk, their crazy genius hippie parents had taken them, dressing them up in whatever costumes seemed appropriate to the year. He and Russell had made big plans for this year. They were going to book a fancy hotel room in the city, even though they both lived just outside the city in their respective apartments.

And Russell had decided that he wasn't going to dress up as some hot new character this year. None of them really did anything for him, he explained to Reggie. Instead, Russell would go as a classic, his all-time favorite: The Joker. But not just any Joker. As "The Dark Knight" Joker. The Heath Ledger Joker. Many moons ago, Russell and Reggie had snuck out to go see it at a Batman retrospective; even their liberal minded parents thought some of it was a bit too intense for seven year olds. But Russell and Reggie had

no intention of missing the most talked about movie in their little brainiac circle (Agile Learning Center, Netropolis). So when everybody pretended they were spending the night at someone else's house, a gaggle of genius kids bribed their way into a movie house and spent two and a half hours spellbound. All the parents found out, of course, and all the kids were grounded, but it was worth it.

Yes, Russell had decided that he would do everything "old school". Three days of Comic-con, three different Heath Ledger Joker costumes. On the first day, Russell would sport the iconic nurse ensemble, hoping to kick things off by giving friends and strangers a bit of a laugh. On the second day he would go as policeman Joker--a Joker not even noticed in the movie by many viewers, as this was the only shot where the Joker appeared with his face scarred, but with no whiteface, sunken eyes, or red smeared lipstick. And on the third day, for the crowning glory, he would finally dress as traditional Joker, with a purple coat, green vest, the whole deal.

Russell had talked about the whole thing with building, childlike excitement, every day, right up to the day he died. But now, none of that macabre hilarity would ensue. Reggie figured that there would never be any macabre hilarity in his life ever again.

Russell was gone. Nonetheless, Reggie just knew that he had to attend Comic-com in his brother's honor. He stared at himself in the mirror. White nurse's uniform, gangly legs, flat white nurse's shoes, dark man-socks, made-up Joker face, and Dent badge. Weirdo, yes. But then again, he was headed for weirdo central.

As he studied himself in the mirror, he saw Hawking in the reflection. The dog was sitting shyly in the corner, studying this odd character. Reggie

walked over, picked him up, put him on the bed, and scratched him behind the ears.

“I miss him too, buddy. I miss him too.”

Hawking stared up at him with his underbite and his big brown eyes.

Suddenly Reggie hugged the dog, fighting back tears and happy that nobody was here to see him in this state. He gave the dog a fresh rawhide, and then headed into the city--dressed like a psychopathic nurse.

When he arrived at Comic-con, he fit right in. He hardly got a second glance. And as painful as it was for Reggie to be at this grand event without his brother in attendance, in a rare bit of good luck, he noticed that virtually all of the numbers dancing over the heads of the attendees were way far out into the future. In the surreal few days that had passed since receiving “the gift”, Reggie had, well . . . not exactly gotten used to the numbers--he just wasn't as overwhelmed by them as he had been in the beginning. Of course, the fact that he'd hardly left his apartment in the last week certainly helped him to avoid the deadly digits.

But it was time to start going out and about in the world again. Time, dare he say it, to share what he knew. Reggie had further decided that if there was any group of people just weird enough, and open-minded enough, and brilliant enough (some of them at least) to believe the bizarre message that he might be bringing to some unlucky souls, it was the crowd gathered here at Comic-con.

He saw a couple of creepy looking people, overgrown kids in a stage of arrested development, about forty years old, dressed as Maggott Man and Tigra the Were Woman, with numbers floating over their heads--one six months into the future, the other about a year out. But they were obviously very heavily drugged up. They would probably overdose. They hadn't even

bothered to cover all the track marks on their arms. Reggie's gut told him it was not worth it. Besides, he got the creepy feeling that their reaction towards his telling them this grim news would go very badly. Reggie figured they would probably beat the crap out of him.

This whole Grim Reaper thing might be even trickier than he had imagined, he mused to himself. But he pushed that thought out of his brain, and got down to the business of Comic-con.

Reggie had brought a white purse with him, to match the Joker nurse's costume, and in it he carried a book. He and Russell had planned to have their copies of "Einstein's Fourth" signed by Brill Waxhead--obviously a pen name, but who cared? Brill was the hottest dystopian fiction writer on the planet, and had been for as long as the brothers could remember. Reggie had formulated a plan: he would get them both autographed. His own, he would keep. And his brother's, he would auction off on eBay and give the proceeds to his brother's favorite charity, SNARR. Dogs. Dog rescue. It was always dogs, with Russell.

Reggie had gotten there early, and was third in line. He waited patiently, not drawing attention, staring at all the other people who looked just as goofy as he did--

--And that was when Brill Waxhead emerged from a back room to great applause, dressed in signature long black leather coat, black boots, pinstripe pants, white Victorian puffy shirt, black top hat--

--And Reggie saw, to his horror, a pulsing red date above the celebrity's head: it was for today. Holy Crap, thought Reggie to himself. The savant genius of dystopian goth, just thirty-one years old, was going to die sometime today.

"Stay calm", Reggie told himself, "Just quietly wait until it is your turn to get your book signed, then briefly explain the situation to him". After all, Reggie

reasoned to himself, Brill Waxhead had spent his life immersed in science fiction—brilliant, reasoned, researched science fiction. Surely Brill might be open to the possibility that Reggie had been imbued with this horrible, unwanted gift. After all, the professor hadn't labeled him nuts. In fact, he had actually offered explanations.

Wait--a letter! That was a better idea, he thought. Maybe if he put it in a note. But there wasn't time, no time! Already Brill was signing the book for the first person in line. Maybe, Reggie thought, I should step aside and write a thorough letter, but no, what if he is gone by the time I write the letter? Brill Waxhead was famous for his disappearing acts, and he never really did seem to like his fans.

And then, suddenly--there he was there, in front of Brill Waxhead. Nothing to do but go for it. Reggie leaned in, a foot from Waxhead's face, and spoke in low tones.

"Mr. Waxhead, I know this is going to sound crazy, but you are going to die today. Actually, first I should have told you how I know that you are going to die today. See, I was at my brother's grave, he died tragically just last week--"

--And security was on him. Security was rife at all Comic-cons, these events being fat with oddballs, more than a few of them deranged. And you couldn't even tell that these muscleheads were security, because most of them were dressed as cop characters from comic books. With an efficiency that was scary, Jim Gordon, Rick Grimes, Renee Montoya, and Dick Tracy all piled on Reggie, grabbed his arms, and whisked him to a nearby elevator. Before he knew it, Reggie was shoved summarily out into a back alley, with the cops bellowing "AND DON'T COME BACK!", or they would call the real cops.

Reggie's slight frame flew through the air and hit the pavement with such a loud crunching that he was sure he had broken something. The door to

the building slammed and locked behind him. Reggie sat up, blinked, and took inventory. It had sounded worse than it was. Nothing felt broken. He checked his glasses. Amazingly, they were unbroken.

He cursed to himself--something Reggie rarely did--and then he stood up, brushing the alley crap off of his costume. Stupid Comic-con. Stupid Brill Waxhead. He had tried to warn the guy. But now, it seemed a certainty that Brill, the best dystopian writer on the planet, was going to die today.

And there was nothing that Reggie could do about it. He felt fairly certain that if he tried to pursue it, he would end up in jail. Still, maybe if he walked it off--the anger, the confusion, the terror that he was feeling right now about his new "gift"--maybe he could think of something. He absently reached into his pocket, to check the time. How long did Brill have? Until midnight? Or more probably, just until some other mysterious and unknown moment, sometime before the clock struck twelve midnight against a dark Netropolis sky.

And then, Reggie saw the cause of the crunching: his phone was shattered. He swore again, trying to remember the last time he had sworn in such close succession. Reggie was, among many other things, an inordinately nice guy. A rare kid.

Nothing to do but just make his way to the electronics store a few blocks over. Reggie loved that store, and he knew they would set him up in no time. He made a mental note to keep his head down as he passed strangers on the street; he just couldn't bear what he might see floating above their heads. (As for changing out of the bizarre and bloody nurse's costume, it simply did not occur to Reggie, because--well, *Reggie*.) He looked like an unholy mess when he walked into the store, but being the city, this particular city, nobody really noticed or cared. He had some dirt and blood on his nurse's costume from

where he'd gotten scraped when he hit the ground, but the clerks at the store all just gave him a semi-stoned look, and muttered "S'up".

He had just finished paying for his new phone when *it* happened.

The row of televisions on the back wall all broke the story at the same time. Reggie stared in horror. A sultry, sexy, scantily clad woman stared out of the screen at him. She was the head anchor for World Order Liberation Federation Fatherland News.

"Ladies and gentleman, the following story contains graphic images, so you may want to call your children into the room. Life Lessons and Teachable Moments are what we are about here, at WOLFF News. In a freak accident, almost befitting his irreverent and oftentimes cruel prose, world-renown dystopian science fiction writer Brill Waxhead died suddenly today in a freak accident. It happened in the city's famous Chelsea Hotel, which just reopened last year after those very controversial renovations. Mr. Waxhead was in the elevator with other guests, when the elevator suddenly stopped for no reason and the doors jolted open, according to witnesses. It was then that Waxhead tried to step out, but then the elevator suddenly began moving again. Waxhead was caught between the elevator and the wall of the elevator shaft. As the elevator began to move, Waxhead was decapitated, and those remaining in the elevator were doused with his blood. Shit, that is nasty, isn't it John? Waxhead was declared dead when emergency medics arrived on the scene. On a cheerier note, items of clothing stained with blood from the beloved author are selling briskly on eBay, with many of the owners of the sanguine celebrity oddments donating the money to Waxhead's favorite charity, an organization for runaway teens. Tune in for our nightly news broadcast, when we will tell you what Brill Waxhead wanted done with his head, in the event of

decapitation. Now on to Metro Lite News! If you like Gummi bears, and you like bagels, you are in for a treat . . .”

Reggie squeezed his eyes shut and fought back the nausea, while a featurette about Finagle Bagle played in the background. He could have done something about this. He could have saved this man’s life. Reggie started trembling. He didn’t want a reprise of the hospital scene; he grabbed his bag with the new phone and bolted out of the store and down a deserted side street, in case he needed to vomit. He forced himself to breathe in and out for a few moments, and it seemed to calm him.

“Thank the Maker,” he mumbled, a line he had stolen from C-3PO. “I can’t hurl every time this happens. I’ll die of malnutrition.” And then, for a fleeting moment, he wondered what his *own* Date of Death was . . .

He needed a plan. He wished he could talk to the professor. But on Saturdays, the professor was never at the encampment. Reggie was never quite sure why. Reggie decided that the best thing he could do at this point was to go home, get a good night’s sleep, and hopefully figure it out in the morning.

He started walking in the direction of the parking garage where his car was sitting, when he was suddenly overcome with pain and fatigue. He passed by a bench and decided to sit for a minute and set his phone up. He didn’t quite know who he expected might call him, but he had a terrible feeling of being disconnected from everyone on the planet-- *even as he knew this very intimate thing about all of them*-- and maybe having a working phone would help. He agonized over the plastic packaging, finally freeing the phone. He went through the motions, absently glancing up when he heard voices. A curious looking couple was standing across the street in front of their closed shop, arguing loudly in some foreign tongue.

Reggie looked across the street, and his mouth dropped open in horror. He stared at the dates, dancing above their heads . . . not again, he thought to himself, “What are the odds?”

And then, he realized that the odds were right in keeping with the true statistics. Eerily so, he thought to himself. He knew--because this is just the kind of thing that the hero of our story would know--that someone died in the city approximately every 9.1 minutes. He further knew that those numbers translated to a little over 158 people per day. Divide that by the population of the city--last Reggie had read, it was 8,622,698--and you come up with a statistic that said 1 out of every 54,574 would die today. That meant that in order for Reggie to have seen three people that would die today, he would have to have seen 163,722 people today.

And that's when Reggie realized: a couple of years ago, Comic-con had crowed about the fact that their crowd had exploded to over 180,000. Admittedly, even though he had gone to the skywalk for a good look down on the colorful costumed crowd, that didn't mean he had seen everyone who would attend Comic-con today. Surely some of the attendees had not arrived yet. Nonetheless, add those Comicon numbers to the several thousand people he must have seen since arriving in the city, and Reggie figured he would be statistically destined to see three death dates today. And, here, right in front of him, arguing in what sounded like some Eastern European language, were quite possibly the next two victims.

Statistics had always fascinated Reggie. Right at this moment, they terrified him.

These thoughts had flown through his head with the speed of a hummingbird's beating heart (1260 beats per minute, when it is flying and jacked up on sugar nectar, Mother Nature's own Red Bull). His mind became a

numbed void for a second, and he could focus on nothing but the decision that he had to make. And he knew, without analysis or debate, what he would do.

“Cripes . . .” he muttered. “I’m really gonna do this.”

He had to do the right thing. He had to try to convince them. No matter what. He had learned about a million facts in his life, but if there was one thing that his parents and his dead brother had always drilled into his head--the professor, too, for that matter--was that you *had* to do the right thing. You just had to. Admittedly, sometimes you could surf the excuse that you weren’t quite sure what the right thing was, but in this case, there was no ambiguity.

And that’s when he saw it. Across the street, the bickering pair was rolling up the metal curtain that protected the store’s large glass windows, and Reggie saw their flashy gold signage: FORTUNE TELLER.

Reggie beamed. It might have shocked people who thought they knew Reggie as the calm, scientific, replicate-your-findings-for-me type, but he had always believed that there was some nether world out there full of realities and possibilities that humankind could only begin to imagine. String theory touted the possibility of parallel worlds. Reincarnation had been tackled by some rigorous Western scientists, and their proofs were weirdly solid. And every scientist that Reggie loved--Einstein being at the top of the list--acknowledged that the universe showed signs of being created by some intelligent entity quite beyond our ken.

And without a doubt, nobody was *less* in a position to question the bestowing of quite possibly supernatural gifts upon a person than Reggie. A couple of weeks ago, he had been thinking about the things that most guys his age obsessed over: video games, pizza, and girls. With a little scientific genius thrown into the mix. Now he could not look someone in the eye without seeing those numbers over their heads: a ghostly gray white, if the numbers were far

out into the distant future, then morphing to white, pink/rose/violet, and finally blood red if the numbers were . . .

Reggie found himself stalling, even though only a couple of minutes had gone by since he first noticed them. They had opened the shop for business, bickering the entire time. Now that he realized she was a fortune teller and the man was some kind of sidekick, their curious appearance made sense. He was built like a professional wrestler, with a thick, black ponytail, and tattoos covering every part of his visible person. She looked like Cher, with headscarf and baggy jewelry and layered Bohemian clothes. Actually, she looked like Cher after a decade or two of drug abuse and heavy drinking. She exuded a kind of harshness.

Still, Reggie knew what he must do. He took a deep breath and strode across the street. He heard the bickering stop as soon as they saw him approach the shop. When he entered, she was all smiles, and the tattooed man secreted himself up to some anteroom. Reggie sat down, feeling ridiculously optimistic. In spite of everything that had happened, he was not old enough to have acquired the jaundice required in situations like this.

The gypsy took Reggie's hand in hers, and then she stared deeply into his eyes. Reggie noticed that she had not yet asked for any money.

"You ran from Comic-con. You are afraid . . . Very afraid."

Reggie's eyes bulged. Damn, she was good. Then he realized.

"Oh, the Heath Ledger nurse get-up. You a Batman fan?"

"Isn't everybody?" she quipped, smiling wryly. Then she stared into his palm, studying it.

"You are searching, friend. You are in pain."

So determined was he to get this one right, it didn't even occur to Reggie how insulting that come on was. He still had scrapes and bruises from the Comic-con incident, any fool could see that. Of course he was in pain.

"Well, never mind about me right now. I want to ask you something, ma'am. Do you predict the future? That's what you do, right? You look into the future, and you can see what is going to happen--not a timeline, more bits and pieces, is what I hear?"

"Something like that. It all depends."

"Oh what?"

"Many things. The spirits and the vibrations, they are fickle. Capricious."

"Look, I know you do this for a living. I can respect that. Some people used to think scientists were practicing witchcraft. You want money?"

He pulled a wad of bills out of his pocket and tossed it all on the table. She tried, not very successfully, to hide her greedy delight. Reggie plowed on:

"Here's the thing. You get a hard time from people, I'll bet, when you claim you can see the future, right?"

"Who have you talked to?" She was suddenly nervous. Reggie noticed the tattooed man peeking suspiciously through the garish curtains.

"Nobody, uh, I mean, uh, generally, ma'am. Some people are skeptical, aren't they? Especially the ones who never walk through this door. Strangers, or maybe people who live around here . . . they find out what you do, and they think you are just a fraud, grifting money from innocent people, right?"

Reading people was not Reggie's strong suit. (Unless you counted his ability to know when they would die.) Had the professor been there in the room, he would have mumbled to Reggie that her anger and paranoia of Reggie's agenda were at odds with her greed. That was a lot of money he had thrown on the table. She covered her nervousness and spoke in honeyed tones.

“Many people live in a very narrow little world. So much the worse for them. So sad . . .” she said, warming up to him. That fat wad of green was just too tempting. She smiled, still clutching his hands.

“I knew I had the gift since I was a child. And you are right, it is not like a motion picture of the future. It is so much more mysterious and elusive than that. Sometimes it comes like a faded photograph. A name, a letter of the alphabet. A scent. Numbers, even, I see around people--”

“YES! That’s it exactly! Numbers! I see them too!” effused Reggie. “I mean, one day, I was at my brother’s funeral, grabbing this giant atom and shrieking at the universe, and the next thing I know, I’m seeing everybody’s date of death dancing above their heads! So lady, I’m getting that you understand where I’m coming from, and ma’am, I am here to tell you, you and your friend lurking behind the curtain, you are both going to die today! I see it! I know it! That is, unless--”

And then ... (*perhaps you, Dear Reader, saw this coming, just as Reggie sees the dates of death*) ... the tattooed goon lunged from the curtains, grabbed Reggie, and once again, the poor kid was thrown hard and fast into the street

Reggie did not know how long he was out for. Could have been a few seconds, could have been an hour--because this was the city, and lots of folks would just as soon step over him than help a limp body out. This, though, Reggie did remember: when he finally did open his eyes, to the distant--or *seemingly* distant sound of “Hey kid, you OK?”, he was staring up at Abraham Lincoln. And George Washington. And Teddy Roosevelt. And Richard Milhous Nixon. Naturally, Reggie screamed.

“Hey kid, calm down. You ain’t dead or nothin’!” said Nixon, smiling cheerily. “This is the day of the America Parade. Floats. Costumes. Bands. Fireworks.”

“Wait a minute,” said Reggie, fuzzy in the head. “Are you talking about the Fourth of July? Wow. How long was I out, anyway, a month?”

“Fourth, Schmourth,” said Abe, his Queens accent in odd contrast to his black suit, beard, and stovetop hat. “Nobody makes a big deal out of the Fourth of July anymore, everybody knows that. This is America Day. June 14th. The parade is gonna be bigger this year than ever! Great costume, by the way.”

“Oh, yeah ... I guess I remember now ... I don’t follow that kind of thing so much.”

“We were just on our way to meet Adams and Clinton and Obama, and we saw that guy give you the old heave-ho. What a meathead. Good thing we came along. You need to go to the hospital, kid?”

“No. No,” said Reggie, “I’m good. In fact, I’m kind of getting the hang of it.”

“What?” said Washington, screwing up his face. George had applied a bit of white powder to his face along with his powdered wig, and his lips had a touch of red lipstick. He looked creepy. But he was a dead ringer for the first President.

“Nothing. But thanks for stopping, sirs. I’ll be OK.”

“Well, if you say so,” said Teddy, “But you’d better get out of the street. The parade is going to be two blocks over, but everybody will be spilling into this intersection. You stagger around in the middle like this, a float could mow you down.”

“Got it. I’ll just go sit over there for a bit, get my head together.”

“OK, but be careful.”

The Presidents all gave him a last look and then trudged away, glancing at him over their shoulders as Reggie, for the second time that day, dusted himself off and checked for injuries. He noticed that the psychic had once again locked up her shop, and he could see the couple peeping at him through the blinds. The numbers were still dancing over their skulls. Reggie just shook his head, stared at them, and then cut back behind the building across the street. He didn't want to go for another round with the muscled man.

He found a grungy sofa behind the building and plopped down on it. He was in pain. And he was baffled. What the hell was he supposed to do? Why had he been given this gift, if--

Suddenly, it was suddenly all so clear to him. He pulled out his new phone. This time, the device had survived the body slam. He turned the camera on, and stared into it.

"Of course! OK, to whoever watches this . . . I haven't worked out the kinks, yet, but I do have a plan. I just realized. When you kidnap someone, you have to pull the crime into the present. You have to show that the victim is still alive, so you show the latest newspaper headlines, and then demand the ransom. But I got the opposite problem here. In order to prove that my gift is real, I gotta prove that I knew these people were going to die today *before* it happens. And the parade is perfect. I can't fake that, I can't photoshop that. OK, folks, I am going to train this camera on that crazy fortune teller's shop, and at that same time, in the same frame, record the parade people coming down the street. And then, with God as my witness, I am going to film these two people until midnight, if that's what it takes--*so I can prove that I knew they would die...* that I knew it would happen well before it did. And if some of you folks would only believe me, then maybe, just maybe. . ."

Reggie trailed off, cut the camera off, and sat for a while deep in thought. He had to find a vantage point where he wouldn't be bothered--and where he

wouldn't be spotted. He peeked around the corner and saw that the greedy couple had opened up shop again, now that they thought the nutcase was gone. They were probably planning on reeling in a lot of easy marks, Reggie figured, what with all the people from the parade, many of them probably a bit drunk, ambling down this street and right past their shop.

Reggie wedged himself into the fire escape, and pulled out his camera. He took out the mini tripod that he always carried with him, and which was jammed into the white Joker Nurse purse, which oddly enough he was still carrying. (Looking ridiculous or visually incongruous was not a thing that ever registered on our hero's radar.) Reggie carefully mounted the new camera phone on the tripod. He trained it on the window of the shop, then practiced zooming in and out, to catch a vista of the second floor living quarters, in case the couple moved their activity upstairs. The curtains were conveniently open, to welcome in the summer sun. Then Reggie pulled out from the window a little, so that the recording would include the stragglers from the parade, making their way down the street. (And if the gypsy and her bodyguard happened to leave the building, Reggie would just make it up as he went along. Perhaps one of the Steel-A-Scooters from the stands that lined the city. . .)

And he started to record. He hunkered down, and dug in, suspecting he might be here for a while. It gave him plenty of time to think: to look back on his life, and to ponder the last couple of crazy, tragic weeks.

Reggie had meant to close his eyes for only a moment, but the twin incidents of being thrown out of doors and onto hard pavement, both in the space of a day, had done a number on his head, and he had drifted into a deep

nap. He remembered that when he had closed his eyes for a “quick nap”, it was some time after noon, the sun was still high in the sky, and the light was playing off the steel and glass of the skyscrapers. When Reggie woke up again, it was near dusk, and the light was fading. He panicked, and squinted into the window of the building across the street. Had he missed it?

No. Good, no, good. He hadn't missed it. An airy looking waif of a woman was coming out the front door of the shop. The fortune teller was walking along with her, and saying her goodbyes. In the background, the tattooed man could be seen lurking. Reggie was getting ready to forage around in his purse for a granola bar when he saw it: something very off. A man wearing a long trench coat and a fedora pulled low strode quickly down the street, heading towards the fortune teller's emporium. Very creepy man, very suspicious. This was it, Reggie knew it in his gut. Could he stop it?

The phone was still recording, sitting on its little tripod. Suddenly, the idea of recording what he feared was about to happen, regardless of how important this proof, seemed terribly ghoulish, and his mind flew through scenarios of how he might stop it--

--And suddenly, it was over. Pop Pop, two quick flashes of light in the encroaching dusk.

Reggie emitted a strange sound, something in between a scream and a gasp, and then he went into a panic, talking to himself, as was his way.

“Damn! Damn damn damn, gotta call 911!”

As Reggie reached for his phone, he knocked it down into the gutter. He fumbled for it, still muttering “Gotta call 911 ... gotta call 911 ..” and then, just as he had his hands on his phone:

Screams, and the wail of sirens.

Oh well, Reggie thought to himself, brushing the crud from his phonberyle. No need to call 911.

His head was throbbing from the insanity of the last few minutes. He had gotten his proof, he told himself. He had wanted proof that he had this gift. Gift? Was that what this was? And he had gotten it. Proof, on camera. But what to do with it? Reggie had an I.Q. that was through the roof, but somehow, he hadn't managed to think things through. Not that far.

Reggie remembered the words of the professor. He had to do something with this gift, but how was he supposed to make anybody believe him? Would this strange recording suffice? It was like a science fiction novel, he thought to himself. It was like something Brill Waxhead would write.

But not anymore. "... *Would have written...*" Reggie corrected himself.

Reggie curled up on the nasty sofa in the fetal position, trembling. "Dammit, Russell. Why did you have to go and die? You'd know what to do about all this . . . but then again," he muttered to himself, "If you hadn't died, I wouldn't be in this situation."

|

He felt the tears welling up. He had hardly cried at all, in these last two weeks. "Dammit Russell, where are you when I need you?"

And then, as though Reggie's plea to the cosmos had been heard, there, walking briskly down the street past the fortune teller's shop, was Russell.

CHAPTER FIVE:
ANGEL ACRES

His brother. There was no mistaking it. There was Russell, wearing one of his many plaid shirts, his eternal khaki pants, striding along with his hands thrust deep in his pockets, as was his way. He stopped, and--Reggie was completely certain about this, and would be until the day he died--Russell looked over at Reggie. Even though Reggie was crouched and trembling on this ratty outdoor sofa, across the street and down the alley, it was unmistakable. Russell halted in his tracks, shot his gaze straight down the alley, and stared at his brother. Then, Russell winked, and cocked his head to one side, as if to say to his brother, "C'mon. Follow me."

And so Reggie did. He jumped up, calling out to his brother. He quickly grabbed his purse, then ran down the alley and onto the sidewalk, just as Russell was turning the corner and walking out of sight.

"Russ! RUSS!" Reggie called, darting down the street. He turned the corner and saw Russell in the distance, down at the other end of the block. And

again, Russell turned to make sure that Reggie was still following him. Another nod, another thrust of his head, telling Reggie, with a strange and wordless urgency, to keep following.

Keep following . . .

And so Reggie did. He darted through the throngs of people, irritating many but ignoring all. He felt jabs of anger towards his brother. Why the hell was Russell doing this to him? Why didn't he stop and wait for his brother, so they could have a dag-blamed conversation, like normal people? Reggie's mind would not let him visit the obvious and tragic truth. His brother was dead. It was Reggie, after all, who had not only seen his brother's bloodied body on the street, but it was Reggie who had officially identified the body.

All the poor kid knew was that he had to catch up. He had to talk to Russell.

The strange cat and mouse game continued for blocks and blocks, a good half an hour, until suddenly Reggie realized. They were at the park. Hampden Park. The phantom in the plaid shirt crossed the street and disappeared into a bower of trees. Finally, miraculously, Reggie was gaining on his brother. A hundred yards, fifty, twenty. Reggie burst through the greenery and came upon a clearing with a bench in the middle of it.

And there, peacefully feeding the pigeons, was Russell. Or at least, Reggie thought it was Russell. He was wearing the same ridiculous garish plaid shirt, after all.

But it was not Russell. It was some middle-aged man. Reggie jogged up to him.

“Excuse me, sir, did you see a guy just come through here, wearing a plaid shirt kind of like yours? Dark hair, cowlick?”

“Kid, it’s the park. It’s a beautiful Saturday afternoon. There’s been a hundred people through here in the last hour, it’s like Grand Central Station.”

“Yeah, but it was just a few seconds ago, sir, I swear I just saw him--”

Reggie was babbling, as he ran in a dozen different directions, straining to see if he could spot Russell making tracks down one of the many walkways.

Reggie stopped. His rational side took over. Was he out of his mind? What was he thinking? Of course Russell wasn’t alive. No, Russell had not magically appeared to lead Reggie right to this place. Reggie flashed on the image of his brother lying dead in the street. This must have been some form of PTSD, Reggie told himself. His brother was dead. And he wasn’t coming back.

And yet . . .he had seen Russell. *He had seen his brother.* He was sure of it.

Reggie plopped down on the bench, barely noticing the man in the plaid shirt. In that moment, it finally occurred to him to take off the nurse’s costume, and he silently applauded himself for having the good sense to wear shorts and a t-shirt underneath. He still absently clutched the white patent leather purse, though. He had nothing else in which to hold his valuables. And as his brain calmed down just a little, he noticed that the man in the plaid shirt seemed unphased by all of this—the costume change, the purse, the case of mistaken identity.

Reggie’s mind went back to a conversation that he and the professor had once shared. The professor was a big fan of writing things down. Scientific diaries, journals. Reggie couldn’t believe everything that had happened, since

the wee hours of this very morning. And, now, the sunset was settling in, tough and angry. What was this mythology about sunsets being so beautiful, Reggie pondered, as he opened his purse and got out his lucky pen and his journal. He started to scrawl.

The old man--he looked older than he had when Reggie first laid eyes on him--just kept feeding the pigeons, occasionally glancing over at Reggie, sizing the kid up. Trying to figure his angle.

“What’cha writing? *Why* are you writing? I can’t remember the last time I saw someone writing. Everybody’s all typing and texting and making messages with Kellerware blinking words and I don’t know what all. And there you are, writing.”

“Cursive, no less,” said Reggie, grinning. He liked this old guy.

“Hey kid, what is so important that you’re writing it in cursive? What are you, a monk or something? Only monks write in cursive anymore.”

“Close enough,” muttered Reggie under his breath. He glanced up and saw the man staring at him. Something about the man . . . something more than just the numbers over his head. The numbers said he would bite the dust in about eight months, and although that seemed too soon, given the man’s age, perhaps fiftyish, Reggie was getting used to this kind of thing. It was a dystopian, ugly, terrorizing and terrifying world, and it seemed as though one out of every few dozen people that Reggie passed carried numbers which suggested they had a year or less to live.

Reggie put down his pen and sighed. He decided.

“Well, sir. I’m writing a story. Science fiction. It’s about a guy who knows when other people are going to die. He can see the date hovering over their heads. And you’d think that would be some great power, wouldn’t you? But it’s not, see? In fact, it almost gets him killed. More than once. One time, I figured that if I could just--”

Suddenly Reggie shut up. He realized that in his enthusiasm, he had gone too far. Now the guy was really eyeballing him.

“Hey kid. That’s not just some story you’re writing, is it? You’re talking about yourself, aren’t you?”

“Are you crazy? Nobody can see when somebody else is going to die. That’s ridiculous.”

“Look kid, I got a gift too. Believe it, don’t believe it. But I’ve always had this knack for being able to know when someone’s telling the truth, or when they’re lyin’. And you are telling the truth. By gum, you are! Look at you! You got that aura!”

“I gotta go, mister--”

Suddenly the man grabbed Reggie’s arm. But it didn’t scare Reggie. Reggie couldn’t put his finger on what he was feeling. He looked into the man’s eyes. He seemed to be telling the truth. Or at least, the man seemed to believe in the truth that he thought he was telling . . . but Reggie knew he couldn’t have anything to do with the man. There was the elephant in the room. Park, whatever. This nasty business of the eerie numbers floating over the man’s head. They were there. Looming. Not as imminent, perhaps, as Brill Waxhead or the fortune teller. But imminent enough.

“Mister, seriously, I gotta go.”

“Do this for me, kid. I’m begging you. You don’t know--”

“--No, mister, *you* don’t know. Sure, everybody wants to know the date of the big day, of the grand dance with death. But then when I *do* say the date, it’s *me* who gets heaved into a dumpster or a cement wall. This ain’t no gift, man.”

“Hey, kid, I can barely heave these pigeon breadcrumbs. It’s not likely I could punch your lights out, even if I wanted to.”

The man still had a hold of Reggie's shirt sleeve. Reggie stopped pulling away. There was something about this stranger.

"Please kid. I'm begging you. I swear on my mother's grave, whatever you say about when it's my time, I won't shoot the messenger."

"I should hope not."

For a moment, there was silence. The stranger stared at Reggie with an intensity that was arresting. Hypnotizing, even. Increasingly, Reggie felt himself starting to believe that there were forces at work in the world that were beyond his understanding. Reggie sighed deeply, wondering just how much he would regret this next move.

"Alright, mister. You asked. I know this isn't what you wanted to hear, but here goes. The date of your death is next year. February 14th. Valentine's Day."

Reggie instinctively winced, waiting for the assault. There was always an assault. Imagine his shock, then, when the stranger grabbed him and hugged him, in a massive and manly embrace.

"I knew it! I prayed for it, and the Lord heard my prayers!"

Reggie stared at him. The man was absolutely crazy.

"It all makes such perfect, poetic sense! And there is no doubt, my friend, you *do* have the gift. You're no scammer!"

The stranger saw Reggie's befuddlement.

"But of course you don't understand, kid. How could you? You tell me that I'm gonna die within the year, and I act like you're the Publishers Clearinghouse guy, handing me a pile of prize money. But here's the thing. My sweetheart, my wife, the love of my life, was born on Valentine's Day. Because, I suppose, she had the sweetest and biggest heart. So of course I proposed on Valentine's Day. And I married her a year later, yes, on Valentine's Day."

The mystified look still hadn't left Reggie's face. The stranger smiled sadly.

“And then, as cruel fate would have it, she passed away on Valentine's Day. A few years ago. Her heart just gave out. I will never understand that. So then, a few months ago, I get more bad news. Doc says I have cancer, maybe a year. So kid, you ain't some damn harbinger of gloom. You're not telling me a damn thing I don't already know. What you *are* telling me, is that I am going to give up the ghost on the same day as my sweet Caroline. Makes sense, I've seen a lot of death lately—I live at Angel's Acres Hospice now, don'cha know—and people do have a way of deciding when it's their time. So Valentine's Day is right around the time the doc predicted. And it is exactly what I've been praying for! I'll be spending Valentine's Day on a white cloud, having a candlelit dinner with my baby. Huzzah!”

And with that, he jumped up and flung his bag of breadcrumbs everywhere, bringing dozens of pigeons flying out of the trees, gobbling up the fare. Reggie was still in shock. Usually, at this point, when announcing somebody's impending demise (with the intention of helping them dodge death, or at least face it with dignity), Reggie would then be on the receiving end of a thorough thrashing—being thrown onto a cement alley walk, or against a brick wall.

Yet here was a man dancing the happy dance. And what Reggie had said made sense to the guy. This day, this date of his death, had profound meaning to him. This was when he intended to let go. And reunite. And hold *her* again.

Reggie never would have had thoughts like this a month ago. But a month ago, his brother was still alive. Reggie's world had not yet been rocked. And he had not yet been granted the strange and extraordinary gift of the dancing death numbers. And all because he had gripped a giant atom with all of his might, stared up at the thundering heavens, and bellowed a questioning

curse to God. And then, Reggie wondered--what the hell had just happened, that crazy business of seeing Russell, which is what got him to this particular park bench?

The man had seated himself on the bench again, after the reverie of contemplating his romantic rendezvous post-death. He leaned in to Reggie, a twinkle in his eye.

“Hey kid, I got an idea. Why don’t you come home with me? To the hospice, I mean. It’s home to me. My friends would love you. Hell, they all know they’re going to kick the bucket anyway, and soon. But you, kid, with your power? Why, you’d give them all the last laugh! Maybe they can’t cheat death. But they can give it a good goosing.”

Reggie jumped up angrily.

“No, no, you don’t get it. People don’t love knowing this. They hate it. They hate me. Talk about killing the messenger. I’m lucky I’m still alive.”

“But kid, think about it. You probably tell people in the prime of their life, so of course they want to kill you. They think if they kill you, they destroy the truth. And if they do that, they won’t die. Not any time soon, at least. But my friends, they know their time is up! They just don’t know when *exactly*. This way, they could, you know, look death in the eye. Decide where they want to be. Who they want to be with. That sort of thing.”

Reggie eyeballed the man. He had a strange sincerity about him, a sort of calm wisdom in the face of death. Hell, perhaps it was having grappled with his own mortality that had given him this calm wisdom. Reggie gave him a sideways smile.

“O.K. You said ‘hospice’. I get it. I’ll go with you. And I’ll look all those poor souls in the eye--or look just over their heads, I suppose I should say. But we all have to talk, first. I have to get their OK.”

“O.K.”

“O.K?”

“Yeah, kid. Let’s do it. The light is fading . . . Oh and call me Harry.”

“Hello, Harry. I’m Reggie.”

When they arrived by shanks’ mare at Angel Acres Hospice, Harry hurried about and shepherded all the residents into the large meeting room. The staff said nothing, overwhelmed and overworked as they were. Whatever this new distraction was, it was fine with them. Buzzing with curiosity, all the residents put their chairs in a circle, then Harry stood up and introduced Reggie.

Now, of course, it was Reggie’s turn.

Reggie gave the creepy yet sincere speech that you might predict, emphasizing that his only desire was *to be helpful*. Would this be a useful thing to know, the date of one’s death?

The group erupted into a frenzy of sturm und drang. Everybody was talking at once, and there was such a range of emotions as you can hardly imagine. But oddly enough, it came down to this:

HARRY: “Alright, folks, now we’re all getting a little excited. It seems to me like the people who are curious to see what Reggie has to say to them, just stay where you are. Everybody else who doesn’t want to know when--well, everyone else who doesn’t want to know can just--”

ANGRY RESIDENTS: “HEY! Why the hell should we be the ones to leave?” . . . “Yeah, what gives?” . . . “We were fine, until you and the kid got things all stirred up!” . . . “You all want to sit down with this voodoo king, take your butts somewhere else!”

It went on like that for a while, everybody talking excitedly and nobody listening to anybody.

And so that is how a couple of dozen residents ended up leaving the general meeting room and relocating to the cozy sunroom, with Reggie setting up his humble video presentation. It was an eerie little show, offering the proof of his cursed gift for reading the date of your death . . . that dark secret which, for millennia beyond counting had, heretofore, been unknowable to us all.

Now, to be clear, Reggie had figured out long before the unexpectedly cheerful and chatty walk back to Angel Acres with Harry that he would simply have to be able to prove to the world that he could, indeed, do this strange and morbid thing that he claimed he could do. To present proof of his gift, if you will. If he was to offer these dying people the chance to have one final “good one” over on the Grim Reaper--to at least know the exact date of their death--then he would have to convince them that his gift was real.

Fortunately for Reggie (?!?), convincing a person that he knew when they were going to die turned out to be easy. Although only about six hours had passed since the grisly decapitating of Brill Waxhead, already dozens of cell phone videos had emerged online, all of them featuring some crazy kid dressed like Heath Ledger’s Joker Nurse, who was dragged out of Comic-con kicking and screaming. And all because he claimed that the famous goth horror writer Brill Waxhead, who was signing autographs at the event, was going to die that very day . . .

When the video was first posted, everyone figured that the mysterious kook, who had disappeared into the bustling city crowd, was just a nut job.

Imagine everybody’s horror, then, when Brill Waxhead actually *did* die in a ghastly elevator accident later that same day. Authorities investigating the

elevator accident declared it to be just that--an accident. There was nothing suspicious about it, except for the payola which must have gone on for years to the inspector of the building, who had clearly turned a blind eye to the dangerously thinning and worn elevator cable.

But a minute is a day and an hour is a week, in internet time, so when some people uttered the suspicion that this crazy Joker kid surely must have had something to do with it--else how could he have predicted Waxhead's death?--another group of intrepid websleuths were able to recreate Reggie's movements after the unceremonious ousting of the poor kid, thanks to the ubiquitous city cameras. Reggie was tracked walking from Comicon to the phone store, about ten blocks, *heading in the exact opposite direction* of the infamous hotel. Security cameras in the phone store even showed Reggie staring in genuine horror at the wall of televisions, as news of Brill Waxhead's death went live. And because investigators further proved that the elevator's faulty parts suffered from neglect, not tampering, that all pretty much put Reggie in the clear, as far as the authorities and the public writ large were concerned. The police considered the case closed.

And although people were naturally curious to know more about this strange kid, Reggie had then disappeared into the crowd and away from the cameras. Because, you see, not every square foot of the city was monitored by surveillance security systems--not yet.

So, back to our proof positive of Reggie's grim gift: Reggie was able to take all the elements of the Brill Waxhead prediction, and combine it with the prognosticative footage he'd taken outside of the gypsy's establishment, and his case was thus made. Reggie had hooked his phone up to the television in the sunroom, and residents were able to watch as Reggie, from a dark alley earlier that day, stared into his phone and announced the imminent death of

the gypsy fortune teller. Then, fast forward to the Pop Pop of the gun--even as Reggie manned his camera phone across the street, clearly not the shooter. It had happened so suddenly after Reggie woke up from his nap that he had not thought to record his own face speaking the words, and then catch the shooting as it happened. But everybody in the hospice sunroom could see that Reggie was far too shocked about the shooting, and horrified over this bloody corroboration of his own gift, to be in any way complicit.

When it was over, the stunned residents all sat in silence. They would, of course, have to devise some system as to how, and where, and precisely *when* Reggie would talk with each of them about this “thing” he knew about all of them.

They had each called their own bluff. And now, they needed to learn to live--and die--with the consequences.

And if there was still any lingering doubt about Reggie’s gifts, Reggie delicately informed everybody that an elderly resident sitting among them, famous for falling asleep during little entertainments hosted by the hospice, was not asleep this time. The morbid, dancing numbers had told Reggie . . .

So. That had been an afternoon that nobody was expecting. Certainly Reggie had not been conditioned to expect such benign--even grateful--reactions from the residents, writ large.

All of them had already accepted the fact of their own death, to a greater or lesser degree, and they had seen so many die before them. But now that they could actually know the precise date of their own death, they generally seemed empowered. Cheerful, even. There was an end date to all of this.

And while most of them accepted the news with a measure of peace and grace, a handful of them went a little crazy. In a good way, one might say. And here, in the anecdotes and chapters that follow, you will see just a sliver of

their reactions to knowing the date of their own death. Many of them, I am sorry to tell you, simply did not want their stories told, and of course I have chosen to respect that.

It is an odd soul, one might argue, who feels that their death ought to be this big, public, thing.

But first, Reggie's next encounter with the professor.

As soon as Reggie was finished with this first bout of convincing the hospice patients that his gift was as eerily amazing he claimed it to be, he ran home to check on Hawking, and then took him along on his urgent errand: Reggie hurried as fast as he could across town to the homeless encampment.

The bizarre events of the day came tumbling out of him. The professor listened earnestly, and there was no skepticism or incredulity to be seen anywhere on his face. When Reggie was done with his story, he shut his mouth and just waited. And stared. And waited.

“So. Professor? What do you make of my Russell sighting? Am I crazy? Hallucinating? Did I ingest something? Part of a government experiment?”

The professor studied Reggie, considering the matter carefully.

“Let me see if I have this straight--the whole point of Russell appearing was to lead you to a dying man who was both elated and comforted by the news you gave him, because the date has great sentimental significance to him, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Got it. And then he took you to another place with more dying people, many of whom felt something akin to ecstasy when they learned that they

could know the exact date of their death, thereby giving them more power than any human being in history has ever had over the fundamental inevitability of our own mortality.”

“Yes.”

“Then I believe that Russell was sent by God.”

“What? But you are a physicist! I just always assumed you were an atheist.”

“Really? Read Einstein. Read Hawking.”

“But--”

“Or perhaps I should say, read your brother’s headstone. Russell believed in God. Just not in the God of the 700 Club. Not in the God of Jerry Falwell. The God of hate, and homophobia. The God that is threatened by science. Russell believed in a *different* God. As do thousands of men of science. Of physics, even.”

He watched Reggie’s face, looking for a reaction. Then, the professor brightened.

“Almost forgot. I have something for you.”

And with that, he pulled a pair of spectacles out of his pocket.

“Eyeglasses?” said Reggie, confused.

“Not just any glasses. Energy Grid Glasses. The Hadron Collider guys all wear them. This pair is for MPE Laser Class 2, meaning a max of 1mW, but I’m working on getting you some 3Rs, for Level 5 mW. They block out all kinds of energy particles and waves--occupational hazard at CERN. I figure these numbers you’re seeing over everybody’s head, they’re probably some form of energy, right? So I’m thinking these glasses will block them, so you don’t go out of your gourd looking at people. And their DODs.”

He handed them to Reggie, who put them on and smiled.

“Professor, you did it! The numbers are gone!” Then Reggie proceeded to take them off and put them on, over and over again, as he stared at the men in the encampment all around. “Dead. *Immortal*. Dying. *Not dying*. Numbers. *No numbers*. Thanks, Professor. You were right. Maybe now I won’t go out of my gourd.”

They fell into casual conversation after that, and for a few minutes, it was as though they were just a couple of regular guys, instead of one brilliant physicist and a dude who could tell you that date you would keel over and die.

Dinner that night was the professor’s speciality: Spam ‘n Pineapple Beautiful Wall Loaf. Cheap wine was abundant. Life was good.

And Hawking felt quite at home as well.

CHAPTER SIX:
THE REAPER'S DANCE CARD

It is not possible here to recount each and every one of the departures of souls that Reggie was to encounter. In point of fact, it is not even possible to explain why it is not possible to recount them. Suffice it to say, we are speaking of matters that are mystical and metaphysical and metempirical and multiversal, of subjects both transcendent and resplendent . . . of secrets both mind-bending and time-bending. Also, the professor threatened to beat the crap out of me if I let these matters leak, given their connection to his current covert topics of study.

But what we can relate to you is the series of events that transpired next. These were the choices—I guess you'd call them "Bucket List" stuff—made by some of the people who suddenly found themselves painfully aware of the precise day that their lives would end. Straight away, they found themselves wanting to do some very specific things, hopefully at the very moment of their death(s).

It felt powerful. It felt elegant. It felt like one hell of a good segue. . .

Johnny Boston (not his real name, but a nickname he had happily, proudly never been able to shake since his days in professional baseball), called

in a series of lovely and cordial strippers, spending all of the money that he had promised to his creepy, greedy, drug-addled grandson. Albeit hastily, and right while the stripper party was raging, he even called in the services of his hospice neighbor, a slowly dying lawyer (don't say it; so rude) and had him set up a solid scholarship fund for the children of the strippers who were also mothers. He fell asleep with his face being straddled, sometime during the opening monologue of The Late Show. (One anal retentive doctor who thought all of this, *all of this*, mind you, was a whole lotta just plain hogwash and mighty dangerous to boot, declared that Johnny had been suffocated to death. But cripes, Johnny's expiration date numbers predicted he'd die on that very day the strippers visited, which had about twenty minutes left to it at the moment Johnny snuffed it. Suffocated between the thighs of the hottest stripper in town! Like Johnny would have cared.)

Margaret Strickland took off in her car for a road trip that involved riding all of the big roller coasters in the country, and—you guessed it—she died riding one, right when she was at the highest peak, closest to heaven. She died happy, in a state of bliss, and her soul, shooting up into the clouds, watched the ensuing panic—the police, the ambulance, the reporters, the thousands of cellphones capturing it all—with mild bemusement.

Ann Samuelson, who was a seventy-six year old aspiring actress, caught the attention of Hollywood with a well placed billboard, invoked the city's pity, and finally got a part in a movie. She had been trying to pull that off for decades, and it took the Grim Reaper as her agent to make it happen. Amazingly, she was actually nominated for a posthumous Academy Award, for her heart-wrenching portrayal of an old homeless woman who froze to death

on Christmas, because the Salvation Army would not allow her to bring her dog, Li'l Max, inside the shelter.

In a similar story, fifteen year old Nicolette Stearns caught some sympathy waves of her own, and did a spontaneous and speedy concert tour which included performances at Carnegie Hall, the Hollywood Bowl, the Royal Albert Hall, and other European hotspots. The whole world agreed she had a marvelous voice, and like Ann Samuelson, she experienced posthumous fame, her CD going platinum after her death.

Barry Alexander challenged his old law partner—with whom he had experienced an ugly falling out—to a jousting match. What's the worst that could happen, Barry asked himself? The enemy's lance would kill him? But as it happened, on the day of the tournament (i.e., the scheduled day of his death), Barry roundly trounced his opponent, who took it surprisingly well; they went out for drinks later, rekindled their friendship, and all long before the stroke of midnight. Before Barry could die right in front of the poor bastard. Not that Barry knew exactly when it would happen. It was a crapshoot, as had been the whole damn partnership. And then, the following day, upon hearing the grim news, Barry's former law partner was so devastated by the death of his new/old friend, that he dedicated a great deal of his time to having the sport of courtly jousting declared an Olympic event. As we all know, he succeeded in these noble efforts.

Thaddeus Washington drove all the way to Denver Colorado and punched a person name James Nolan Mason right in the face—even though the guy was very old and got around in a wheelchair—and ol' Thaddeus managed to break Mason's nose and get blood on that old man's Swastika armband. As the police

were taking Thaddeus away, and reporters asked why he did what he did, Thaddeus simply responded, “It’s my dying wish to punch a Nazi in the face.” But wait, there’s more. Because Thaddeus died later that day in his jail cell (something Tad knew would happen, and had fully accepted), his family was able to finagle a police brutality charge, since the lily white cops had indeed roughed up the dark skinned avenger, and the family got a very big wad of money, so that took a bit of the edge off of losing Thaddeus too young to an aggressive tumor.

Sheryl Friedley visited Niagara Falls, which she had always wanted to see but never had the chance. And no, she didn’t try to go over the falls in a barrel or anything; she thought there was too much of a chance for disaster, and while that wouldn’t in and of itself have changed that date of her death, she didn’t want to take the chance of traumatizing the tourists, especially any children who might witness it, to say nothing of the poor rescue crew who would have to fish out her body. No, instead, she just watched the spectacular falls for a long time, went back to her suite at the fancy five star hotel, sipped some wine, watched the sunset, and quietly left this Veil of Tears.

Eric Stewart journeyed to Norway to see the Northern Lights; he died watching them and weeping for joy.

Carol Langford, who actually had been an *extremely* religious Southern Baptist in her youth, did an elaborate strip show at none other than the Boom Boom Room in St. Louis, and what made it even more outrageous still is that she had, until a couple of years before her death, been a Catholic nun, an actual nun who lived in a convent. (Long story for another time and place, the journey from Southern Baptist to Catholic to Boom Boom.) Oh, and don’t dare

ask how old she is/was. A lady never tells, and in spite of it all, Carol was very much a lady.

And then there was so much more—poor terminal folks who spent their last days skinny dipping, parasailing, bungee jumping, swimming with sharks—and—for some reason this struck me as one of the weirdest choices of all—one person got their entire body covered in tattoos. Fresh, colorful tattoos.

Some of the bucket list wishes were surprisingly simple: Bruce Manchester went part of the way across country on a horse, for no other real reason than, he wanted to eat every remaining meal from a fast food drive through, savoring the reactions as he ordered through the little speaker while on horseback, and then picked up the food at the window on horseback.

And Rod Winge, labeled a nerd for pretty much his entire short life (he would be thirty-eight when he died), decided that, since he now knew the date of his death—which was actually three months longer than the doctors had predicted—he would die covered in butterflies. Yes, butterflies! It was an odd fantasy that he had harbored ever since he was eight years old. And so, after embarking upon a whirlwind trip that would end in the jungles of Mexico, Winge found himself naked, up in a tree, and covered with honey water. He'd made up a batch of the stuff, and he sprayed himself thoroughly with the concoction, thrilled to learn that the old wives' tale was true: it would attract butterflies. And that was how he passed. Peacefully, joyfully, and feeling the fluttering of a thousand little wings all over his flesh—flesh that would soon become food for the wild things, while his soul awaited its next reincarnation.

Oh, and last but not least, lest you think some of these bucket list items are too dreamy or romantic, Joseph Becker hunted down his daughter's rapist and tortured him for three days, before finally stabbing him in the crotch and letting him bleed out. After he died, his film friends made a documentary about it.

But perhaps the most mystical of all was Meg, who had always wanted to sleep among large wild cats. Meg was a bit of a kook, granted. She was one of a small handful who had decided to take drugs that would amp up her energy, since the cancer had made her oh so tired, all the time now—and since there was certainly no fear of addiction. Meg was a young fifty-four, and she had spent her life working with animals. Ah, she would regale you with the slightest provocation, what beautiful and breathtaking voyages she had made into the forests and jungles of this sweet, dirty Earth, exploring the planet's dwindling ecosystems!

But Meg had one fantasy that had gone unfulfilled: she longed to sleep among the big cats.

Of course, everyone who knew her ridiculed the notion, and warned her against this notion in the gravest of tones. And Meg respected the fact that wild animals were not to be confused with pets. But still, the dream would not die . . . and since she apparently *would* die, and soon, she decided what the hell?

In the Netropolis, there was a zoo. Zoos were few and far between, these days. They upset the Conservicans because they used too many resources of all kinds that could go to making people happier. And the Zoos upset the Liberlefts because they wanted the fading numbers of the gorgeous wild creature to live out their lives in the wild, or at least in the vast loving sanctuaries that had been established by fierce protectors on all of the ravaged continents.

However the Netropolis did have a zoo. It had been there for as long as anyone could remember, since the 1860's. It was one of the nicer ones left on the planet, thanks to a coterie of people with lots of money and a proper sense of compassion. But.

But. Nobody was going to give Meg permission to lie with the cats, so she would just have to make the opportunity. She was floating on a cloud of Methatanyl and Dilaudderall as she made her way across the dark town, across a black night. There was a full moon.

It was a beautiful night to die.

But the cats would not be the cause of her death. Scaling the fence was no great challenge; she was still lithe and limber, the drugs making her strong. She lay down on the grass, under the fat full moon, and waited. The cats emerged from their hiding places, curious, but not too curious. They lay down next to her, and began to make sounds; it was an odd combination of growls, purrs, prustens and chuffles.

When Meg took her last breath, the tigers looked over at her. One went over and licked her face, but alas, Meg was gone. Naturally, the talk in all the news outlets was how this was a terrible idea, a very stupid idea, what Meg had done, but those who carried her body out swore that it was the most peaceful human visage they had even seen.

The last two stories (as in, the ones that you are about to read) were fleshed out in somewhat more detail. We have already explained that we are not at liberty to explain why the narrator of these stories (myself), is not always third person omniscient god, but sometimes first person. It has to do with first hand experience and first hand hearing of the stories, but as I have

said, that gets into matters so very metaphysical that it would defy comprehension or belief for most people.

CHAPTER SEVEN:
THE MELTING DOWN

He picked it up from the jewelers on 43rd Street, and as he held it in his hands, he couldn't help but notice that his entire body was shaking. He knew that he was going to die, and soon. But he had made peace with that. That wasn't why he was shaking.

He had left the hospice almost without notice, although he did stop to say a few somber goodbyes to some people who had become friends. One of those friends was Reggie, the guy who'd told him he would die in mere days, and for reasons that Jag would never understand ("never" being relative in this case, as he had only a few more days on this earth)--he *thanked* Reggie. He did this, he suspected, because this new certainty regarding his "death deadline" gave him the impetus to take care of one last piece of unfinished business.

He then left the hospice for the last time, and went to retrieve his car from its secret place in the city. After that, he loaded up on a lot of finger food from the local organic grocery. Over three hundred bucks for a few small bags;

the New World Order had changed so damn much. Jag was definitely ready to leave this earth, for this and a whole host of reasons.

Then, groceries and secret gift in hand, he took off, heading west. (Planes were grounded for the next few days; there had been another Incident. And so, instead, he had no choice but to drive. If he was going to do this crazy thing.) He had made up his mind, not too long after Reggie had shown him the grim truth. He would take the road trip that he and so many rock 'n rollers of renown had sung about for decades immemorial--from the city which, if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere, all the way to Ventura Highway in the snow.

The trip was uneventful, and he spent the long hours reviewing his life up to this point, for what was going to be the very last time. Like others with Reggie's dark vista, he wondered if he would even make it to his destination. It was only natural. Human instinct. Jag wondered if the trip was precisely what was going to kill him. But he had to make the trip; not making it was no longer an option. The notion of this journey had popped into his brain immediately, as soon as he heard of his imminent demise.

His cancer was not quite as advanced as some in hospice--he looked almost normal, in fact--so maybe, thought Jag, it would be an old fashioned, garden variety heart attack that took him down. Lord knows he had abused his body enough, back in the day, with all that cocaine. How many nights sleep had he lost, spending hours awash in regret, wishing he could take back all of those white lines . . .

. . . enough white lines to make divided highway markers on Route 66 all the way from the City That Never Sleeps to the Windy City to the City Of Lost Angels. He kept thinking about those white lines, those long days, those endless nights, those hit songs, those piles of cash, those tours from town to

town to town, all around the globe. And those endless musical notes, their jagged staffs cutting into a wee pile of white snow on a mirror.

Shit. If he didn't wake up, he would die from falling asleep at the wheel. He looked at the time. Damn. Not much time left, and a lot of ground to cover. But if he drove into a truck . . . After all he had survived, now *that* would be tragic.

He pulled over at a rest stop. Slept hard. There was actually a fatal shooting at that rest stop—not such an unusual occurrence any more—and Jag slept right through it, if that means anything. When he opened his eyes, he was suddenly wide awake, and when he saw the time, he cursed and pounded his fists against the steering wheel, making the horn blast. Parents eyeballed him and hurried their children past his car, towards the restrooms.

He drove. Like a maniac he drove.

When he got to her town, he stopped by a roadside stand and bought a mammoth bouquet of flowers. She was a writer, and had always hated clichés, but maybe this was the time for clichés. Less of a cliché, he had a large quantity of peanut brittle that he had purchased at the health food store, back in the big city. Best damn peanut brittle in the country, some would claim. He remembered that she loved peanut brittle. Crazy for it, she was.

He pulled into the driveway. The house looked almost exactly the same as it had looked all those years ago, when she was just a girl and he figured he would live forever.

He knocked. She answered. She stared in shock.

“Jag Armstrong. As I live and breathe. . .”

“I love you.” he said.

He waited for her reaction. For a moment, she just studied him. She looked the same: a decade, give or take, had not aged her a whit.

“I know,” she said. “I know you love me, Jag.”

She did not invite him in, but came out on the porch and sat down in one of the big, comfy rockers. She glanced at him and nodded her head, indicating that he should do the same.

“No,” he said. “I’d rather stand for this. I have to get all of this out.”

She said nothing, but merely leaned back, and blinked a couple of times expectantly--a quirk from the old days. He started talking. He had rehearsed what he was going to say in the car for days, but now, it just sounded to his own ears like mindless babbling.

“It is the worst part of my life, Celia, that I didn’t end up with you. I know you tried. You tried for ten years. For a full goddam decade, you chased me and tried to talk sense into me. But the bigger my record sales got, and the bigger my fan base got, the bigger my ego got, and the worse the drugs got.”

She smiled sideways, cocking her head at him.

“The women. Don’t forget about the women.”

“Yes. The women. And the more women that threw themselves at me, the more I couldn’t resist them.”

“Yeah. Remember all the times I tried to surprise you? Boy, did I surprise you.”

“I know. I know. But it’s not like I didn’t ask you to come along, Celia.”

“I wanted to become an oceanographer. You don’t become an oceanographer by being a groupie.”

“I know. Giving up on me was clearly the best thing you could have done for yourself. And, in a weird way, for me, too.”

At some point in his rambling, he had seated himself in the other rocker. When he grew suddenly tired of talking, they sat in silence for a while. And when the conversation resumed, they tripped and slipped through memories in the way that old sweethearts do.

Then, without warning, but just a bit shyly, she took him by the hand and led him from the porch, through the front door, and to her bedroom in the back of the house. What happened there cannot be described--or perhaps we should say, need not be described.

If you have ever shared such love, you don't need it articulated. And if you have never experienced such passion, there are no words which could truly describe it to you, so what would be the point? What would be the point?

Some hours passed, and they went back out on the porch to share a sip of wine. As they settled back into the rocking chairs, Jag noticed with great sadness that the sunset was upon them. He had not had the heart to tell her that he would be dead by midnight at the very latest.

He knew he needed to. It would be cruel for it to just happen, right in front of her, when in truth, he did have a chance to prepare her. But it was equally unthinkable to leave, especially in light of what they had just shared, and then to die in his car, or in some seedy little hotel room, all alone.

After all, the plan--perhaps as selfish as most of his life plans had been--was to die in her arms.

He was just about to broach the subject, rehearsing in his mind how to say it, as he had done a thousand times in the car on the way here:

"... 'Truth is, I am going to die much sooner than anybody thought. Today, actually'... or 'Celia, I've thought about marrying you ever since I got clean, but as it turns out'..."

But before he could get the words out, a car drove up.

“That’ll be the kids,” said Celia, and Jag perked up, his energy renewed.

Then, a very odd thing happened. Two teenagers, a boy and a girl, both bounded past her, ignoring the man sitting next to her.

“Hi mom!”

“Hey mom, hey mister!”

And they ran past Jag into the house. The girl was yelling an explanation to her mother from the kitchen.

“Mom, I forgot the forms for people to fill out, and Jay forgot his favorite bow, can you believe it?”

And within seconds, they were running back out onto the porch, past the grown-ups in the rockers, the girl stopping to kiss her mom on the cheek. The girl was out of breath.

“Sorry we can’t stay and visit, but we are sooo late.”

And like that, they were gone. The car sped off, Celia smiling sadly. Jag looked at her, his smile mirroring hers.

“They’re beautiful, Celia. Just beautiful. I’m so glad that if we couldn’t have a life together, because I could never get my goddam act together, that at least, you have them--wait, I didn’t mean ‘*at least*’, kids are never an ‘*at least*’. But what I meant is--”

“I know what you meant,” Celia said, taking his hand.

“I mean, I always knew that Harold was a good man,” continued Jag, “And that he’d be a good father--”

And then Jag stopped.

“Wait a minute. Those kids are too old to--didn’t you guys get married about a decade ago? I remember because I heard the news at my birthday in Paris when I turned--”

Then he saw her smile change, from something sad, to something wry.

“Oh my God, Celia. Are they. . .?”

She nodded slowly.

“Twins. Seventeen. The night before you left on your first tour, I'm sure of it. Why do you think I wanted you back so bad?”

“Why didn't you tell me?”

“That's the thing, Jag. I did. I tried. You were so wasted, you didn't remember. And then, I decided that I didn't want you back until you were clean. After all, if you wouldn't get clean for me . . .”

“You don't have to explain--but--” Suddenly Jag was beaming. “Celia, tell me about them. What are they like? What do they like?”

“Oh Jag, you can be so proud. Jason is going to Juilliard on a violin scholarship.”

“Really? I played when I was a kid, remember?”

“Of course. And Jessica is now an official member of Greenpeace. She's been arrested twice. For causes, not drugs. She's so much like you used to be. They both are.”

“God, that makes me happy.”

“I'm glad you showed up, Jag. So I could tell you. Hey, I'll get out the scrapbooks, and we can spend as long as you want, you getting to know your kids. Oh, how long can you stay? Harold has the kids this weekend. They won't be coming back here tonight. Of course we're divorced, I guess you heard--but first, changing the subject. What is that mysterious bag you've been dragging around and won't let go of?”

“Oh, it's a present for you,” he said, beaming, but thinking about how he was still avoiding telling her the truth.

“I love presents! But you remembered that, didn't you? Gimme gimme!”

He handed the satin bag to her. She pulled out a thing both beautiful and strange: a sculpture of a broken heart sitting on a stand. It had an unusual dusk-colored hue. As he glanced at the object, now out of the bag, the color of it made him think of the encroaching sunset, and how little time he had. But she was studying the little sculpture.

“Oh, Jag! It’s beautiful.”

“It’s to remind you that you were the best part of me. That I was never whole without you. But mostly, any legacy I leave behind, the music--and now, them, Celia, those beautiful kids. It’s all you. I thank God for you.”

“I love it, Jag. It’s just so unusual. Did you buy it? Is this some artist that I might have heard of?”

“It’s my Grammy.”

Her eyes widened.

“What?!”

“Celia, that stupid award never meant anything to me. Because you weren’t there. You weren’t there to get the credit. Never meant a thing, not the night I got it, and never since. So I had it melted down and transformed. That’s rose gold that it’s covered in. And I want you to have it. Always.”

She smiled, a huge smile, like the old days. She leaned over and kissed him.

“I love you, Jag. I always have. And I always will.”

“Same here, kid. Say, this is a crazy request, but since we’re spending the day down memory lane, let’s break into that peanut brittle.”

“Sure, that sounds great.”

But before he could have some, he took his last breath.

Celia sobbed, but was not surprised. She had heard about the cancer, of course.

She held him, and kissed him, and held him, and watching the setting sun, held him some more, until his body was not even warm anymore.

CHAPTER EIGHT:
STAND BY ME, LIE WITH ME, DIE WITH ME.

“Garraty wondered how it would be, to lie in the biggest, dustiest library silence of all, dreaming endless, thoughtless dreams behind gummed down eyelids, dressed forever in your Sunday suit. No worries about money, success, fear, joy, pain, sorrow, sex, or love. Absolute zero. No father, mother, girlfriend, lover. The dead are orphans. No company but the silence like a moth's wing. An end to the agony of movement, to the long nightmare of going down the road. The body in peace, stillness, and order. The perfect darkness of death.”

--Richard Bachman, “The Long Walk.”

It was only a three-hour drive to the treehouse, but he felt as if he was traveling fifty years back in time. Half a century. Half a damn century. Jeez. The better part of a human being's life on this Earth.

In his world famous body of work, he was hardly known for reflecting upon The Human Condition. He was more known for terrifying people. (And not to put too fine a point on it, but he would have argued that folks trudging

around on sweet, dirty Mother Earth in a constant state of terror *was* the overarching Human Condition.)

Simply put, Richard Bachman had amassed great fame and fortune by appealing to folks's deepest, darkest fears. Their night terrors. Anything to have a respite from the humdrum existence, and the dreary, daily, drumbeat that was the soundtrack for their droll little lives.

But lately, Richard (and it was "Richard", by the way, never "Ricky" or "Rick", and definitely never "Dick"; his friends, the fearsome five, had tried all those obvious "Dick" jokes when he was a kid, and he'd nipped that one in the bud) had been much more amenable to reflection. And now, with his own end so very imminent--*and Richard knowing the exact date!*-- thanks to Reggie's amazing gift . . . well, Richard had decided that he would make the long drive home.

He got to his old home town later than he expected, and he could not help but notice, with a bittersweet smirk, that a medley of his favorite rock songs by his favorite band was playing as he crossed the state line, then pulled off the interstate and cruised the backroads to the tiny town's welcome signs: first "Roll on Down the Highway" and "Let it Ride", then, as pastoral countryside took over, "Takin' Care of Business" and, *ironie des ironies*, "You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet". The world would have laughed at the irony, if it knew what was about to transpire.

As he drove into the tiny town, which had not changed very much at all in lo these many decades, Richard drove by his childhood home--but he did not stop there. It was now a tourist attraction. He had enough memories, and he did not want to deal with being recognized by fawning fans. Instead, he drove on, to the woods, and easily found the dirt road that wound through the forest. He proceeded slowly, enjoying the majesty of the tall trees all around him.

Then, he saw it. His face lit up in a fat grin. And he found himself overwhelmed by a flood of emotions. He thought for a moment that he might shed a tear.

It was still there. The treehouse was still there. You might ask why it was still there; how could it be that this old tree house was still there after so many decades? Surely time and nature would have taken their twin tolls. But this was a special treehouse. It was the treehouse where Richard Bachman had spent so much of his youth, where he had first scribbled his boyhood short stories, and it was where his first novella was set. So naturally, folks from town had taken it upon themselves to preserve the treehouse by replacing boards and rebuilding parts of it over the years. They had done it artfully, using weathered wood, so there was never a sense of newness or repair hanging over it ... only the memories of an innocence that was very long gone.

Richard was tired. The drive had worn him out. He had said a few goodbyes at the hospice, but beyond that, nobody really knew where he was going or what he was up to. He had no family to speak of. Both of his parents had passed away in the last few years, and as for children--well, the tragic drowning of his son had become an international story, a heartbreak heard round the world, thus robbing him and his wife of any opportunity to mourn in private. It had taken Inez a couple of years to get over some of the creepy gifts that poured in following the death of their son, but she eventually came to accept that lunatic fringe fans just went with the territory. And, finally, Richard's sweet wife of half a century had passed gently in her sleep two years ago, and he imagined he would be joining her soon--although his personal beliefs did not read that as an absolute certainty.

One thing was certain, though. He was going to die tomorrow. Reggie had convinced him of that. And tomorrow was imminent. The sun was setting

as he came upon the tree house, and who knew when he would breathe his last breath. Richard wondered if it would be a few minutes after midnight? Or would it be a few minutes before tomorrow's midnight, and would he have to wait another day to die? Probably somewhere in between.

A scant year ago, he never would have imagined that he would ever have occasion to utter these words: "*Would he have to wait another day to die?*" Ah well. It had been a good run. He'd lived a good life, a successful life. He had loved deeply, and been loved deeply right back.

Richard got out of the car, leaving a note on the dashboard, and mused with bittersweet irony that this was the last thing he would ever write. He walked over to the big old tree. There were times when this tree, it seemed, had been his only real friend. But there had been another squadron of friends. Good friends. The best buds ever, it had sometimes seemed to him in his youth. In fact, he would often muse to the assorted adults who populated the later decades of his life, "*I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, does anyone?*" He had even famously said it on a big talk show once. That line had gotten quoted a lot after that—but before "viral" was a thing.

The rope and plank ladder was still there, still true, and Richard knew that it had been subtly replaced over the decades. He shrugged and grinned at nobody, muttering "Aw, what the hell" to the chipmunks. He gave the ladder a tug, and then he gave it a climb. The cancer had weakened him, and the fact that he could even make the climb seemed almost supernatural to him. Perhaps the Almighty had his back more than he'd ever suspected.

He watched his perspective of the forest transform from ground's eye view to that of a climbing creature, a flying creature. He was a good thirty feet above the ground, the treehouse just above his head. The memories came rushing back: if you wanted to, if you were young and strong, you could hoist

yourself up over the branches and enter a proper door, always sure to give the secret knock--that is, if you even had any business being there at all. But there was also a kind of trap door in the floor of the treehouse. So Richard, suddenly tired from all that had happened, and feeling generally worn down from his life, decided not to bother with the hoisting, instead he just shoved his head up through the trapdoor. With only a little more effort, he found himself on the floor of the tree house.

Suddenly he burst into the biggest smile he'd offered the world in years. Nothing had changed. He couldn't imagine what had covertly been added or replaced or stolen, but it sure as hell felt to him exactly like it had felt fifty years ago. Half a century ago. . .

We should clarify the timeline here. The club had all met in the treehouse when the guys were all roughly ten years old, but that didn't make Richard Bachman sixty years old. In fact he was older than that; the cancer had grabbed hold of him late in life, so he wasn't particularly bitter about it. Not as much as some might be.

But the reason he remembered the date as being fifty years ago is that long after the treehouse had been abandoned by the club, Richard had sometimes come here to write. When he had a really bad case of writer's block, or had received some particularly scathing reviews. Or when life had been cruel to him, too cruel to even use in the novels that fell squarely into the horror genre, Richard would come here, and he would be restored. He would write a few pages on his old manual Remington, and then relax for a while in this kingdom of trees. Then he would return to civilization, and petition for re-entry back into the real world, whatever the hell that was.

He looked around. It never ceased to amaze him that the stash of supplies--oddments so crucial to any clubhouse/treehouse--were always still there, after lo these many years. Richard suspected that some of the items, like the weathered boards themselves, were replaced by the nameless curators of this little museum, after more easily tempted fans had purloined them. But to Richard, it looked as though everything was just where the club had left it so very many years ago.

There was the rusty pogo stick: all the club members had used it at different times, but only Richard had suffered the humiliation of having a mother who insisted that he wear a protective helmet every time he took off down the street, bounding and bouncing like a kangaroo on mushrooms.

And there was, of course, the beloved Etch-a-Sketch. It was propped up on a makeshift shelf. Richard had treasured his Etch-a-Sketch as a kid; he had in fact gone through about a half a dozen of them over the years. Later, when he was a famous writer, he had once taken it along with him to a little talk he was supposed to give to a bunch of 'tweens at a school in Lovell, Maine, but when he began to demonstrate it, they all started laugh and cackle crazily, their too-cool-for-school condescension dripping from their superior little selves.

He had never gotten a chance to say much, and when his allotted fifteen minutes was up, he shuffled out, a world famous writer humiliated by the Mean Girls and Bad Boys. But throughout the years, the whole thing just made him laugh. There were other board games in the treehouse--Monopoly, Uranium Rush, a Ouija Board--but none of those, not even the Ouija Board, had consumed so many hours of his childhood as the Etch-a-Sketch. Whole city skylines had been meticulously recreated through Richard Bachman's lonely patience.

The most precious part of the collection though, was surely the vintage Playboys. The very first was Marilyn, and that one, of course, did not last long in the treehouse. But diehard fans did occasionally slip lovingly manufactured reprints of that first edition back into the clubhouse, and it was amazing that originals like the Bridget Bardot and Jayne Mansfield editions managed to remain cheerful prisoners in the wooded castle.

And last but not least, there was the vintage junk food: cans of Spam, Libby's Corned Beef, Charles Chips, Fizzies, Atomic Fireballs, Dippy Canoes, Daisies, Whistles, Bugles, Zagnut bars, and, (an ongoing contribution from Richard Bachman's crazy Brit uncle) Spotted Dick in a Can, a dining prospect that never failed to fill the treehouse with gales of laughter from the boys.

Richard had brought supplies to make himself comfortable. He had a backpack with him. He unzipped it, pulling out a small pillow and a thin but warm blanket. He had also purloined a bottle of moonshine from the same place at the back of the town's only filling station that everybody's fathers and grandfathers had gone to for their hooch, back in the day. (For most men, it was an "end of the week" thing. Sales were particularly brisk on Friday night, twenty minutes after the mill whistle. And for decades, the only local lawman had looked the other way, seeing as how his brother was the moonshiner.)

Richard kicked back, staring at what was left of the sunset through the slits in the tree house roof, filled with a strange otherworldly calm. He never would have guessed, even as recently as a week ago, when Reggie had given him the news, that he could feel this peaceful about dying. He drank deeply from the Ball jar of nondescript but very strong moonshine.

He watched the light drain from the sky, even as life was draining from his body. And it was the specter of death, not the booze, that caused his mind to begin to lift and drift into another dimension.

“Is this what it feels like? Am I dying?” he asked nobody in particular.

And then--and it seemed more surreal than anything he could have imagined, or put to paper--it happened that he *was not* talking to nobody in particular. He was summoning some very particular people. The trapdoor of the treehouse popped up. A head came through it, and then a torso in a T-shirt and shorts, then the gangly legs, and finally, the oversized red Keds high top sneakers. Stunned, Richard realized that he was looking upon the face of his best friend, Butch. Then another body lifted itself up through the trap door. Holy crap, it was Tom! Followed by Wilbur, and lastly Calvin.

They were all standing in the treehouse now, looking down at him--yet they appeared not as the children he remembered, but as adult men. The treehouse was acting like a treehouse on acid, as it was amazingly able to allow them to stand up fully, even though these ghosts were nearly six feet in height, and the treehouse had never been more than five feet, from floor to roof.

Richard ran his eyes over the four ghosts standing before him. One of them was tall, dignified, and seemed like Marley in “A Christmas Carol”, because he appeared to be wearing the memories of expensive clothes, but his dapper image was interrupted by a large bloody gash on the side of his head, where a bullet had entered and torn away much of the bone and flesh. The blood dripped steadily down onto his otherwise perfectly tailored suit--even in death. This ghost Richard recognized as tragic Tom.

The next ghost was also a strange contradiction: perfectly handsome in the face, with movie star good looks, but he was horribly gaunt. And emaciated, horrifically so. This would be poor old Butch.

Next to him stood a figure even stranger still: a man whose limbs and joints were all akimbo, elbows and knees facing the wrong direction, and his body posed in a position that looked horribly awkward and painful--but which

the ghost carried off with an air of resigned acceptance. Wilbur. He hadn't seen Wilbur in decades, but the cherubic, boyish visage of his youth was there, the torturous twists of his limbs notwithstanding.

The last ghost was on the short side, chubby, and had the smiling face of the Pillsbury Doughboy. That would be Calvin.

Richard beamed at the line-up. Even in this grisly, ghoulish state, they were familiar to him. He would have recognized the ragtag band anywhere. The Fearsome Five! (Well, there were four of them. But Richard, still awkwardly alive, rounded out the group.)

When he finally spoke, it was haltingly.

"But guys, what are you . . . how did . . . that is . . . "

"We had a feeling you'd come here."

Richard squinted at the ghosts in the fading light, trying to discern who had just said this. "Crimony," Richard said, sitting up slowly, still clutching the Ball jar full of moonshine. "I haven't seen you guys since--"

"--since that schlocky parade, where I presented you with the key to the city. Or the key to our small town, rather." (This from Tom, the Well-Dressed Man with the bullet hole in his skull.)

"--and that other time you came through town for my kid's christening, because I named one of my kids after one of your characters. Ha ha. I don't know what the hell the wife and I were thinking." (This from Calvin, AKA the Pillsbury Doughboy.)

"--my big weird interview on ESPN. You were in the audience. Then, we were supposed to get together for drinks a couple of weeks after that, but the poor Danny passed away, and you--" (This was Butch, The Emaciated Man, adding his two cents.) "--went into rehab," said Richard, finishing the sentence and taking a swig of the moonshine.

"And the last time you saw me was at our ten year reunion." (This from Wilbur, Akimbo Man with the grotesquely distorted arms and legs.)

Richard nodded, eyeing the row of ghosts, putting it all together.

"So all of you are--?"

"That's right . . .yup . . . mmmm . . .we're dead," they all murmured together.

"Although that's not really a term anybody uses on this side," said the dapper man, Tom.

"Well, this is definitely not what I was expecting," said Richard, taking another sip from the Ball jar and then realizing this was rude. He offered some to his friends.

"Joe Bob's Joy Juice? "

They surprised him by obliging. Richard Bachman, who was *actually not quite dead yet*, would have thought that a ghost could not ... but Butch took the Bell jar first, helped himself to a long swig, and handed it off to the rest of them, who also drank deeply. Richard watched in fascination as the gorgeous amber liquid rolled around in their transparent mouths, then down each ghost's gullet, and into the belly. He shrugged. This whole thing was so weird, he didn't know why this particular detail would strike him as any weirder than the rest. Booze, hooch, moonshine. I guess some things never change, he thought to himself. Richard stared at the four of them. He squinted, as though by squinting, he might be able to understand the ghosts better.

"Okay. I'm getting this now. Why you guys look the way you do . . .Butch, you were so sick at the end, I was on my way to see you and I didn't make it in time, so that's why you don't exactly have your football physique from back in the day. And Tom, no offense, but everybody knows you blew your brains out. But you were always a natty dresser. Wilbur, none of us knew what the heck happened to you, but at the end it must have been something

horrible. I'm guessing you fell off a cliff? You always did like to climb a mountain. And you, Calvin, all blown up like that, with your stomach all hugely distended, it's almost like in dying, they didn't find your body for days and--"

"--I got fat, all right? Yes, while I was still alive. For Pete's sake, I like to eat. I was a fatty. You know I was always a fatty."

"Sorry, man. This is just a little awkward for me. "

"Hey, I've got an idea," said Butch, sitting down and leaning back against the old weathered walls of the tree house. "Remember how we all used to come here every Sunday after our moms had dragged us to church?"

The other ghosts, also sitting down and relaxing, nodded in unison, the memories flooding back.

"And remember, we had this little ritual," continued Butch. "Because we lived in different parts of town, and then when they started breaking us up into different schools, we'd all meet here and share the high points of our week. Remember, before we planned our next great escapade? I think it kept us from drifting apart, when everything else seemed to be pulling us all in different directions. I recall being secretly pretty scared about all that. You guys were my only real friends. Why don't we do that now? Share the high points."

Richard leaned back on his elbow and smiled sadly. "I do remember that. I think that's a good idea, Butch. I cannot think of a better way of catching up."

Suddenly Tom lashed out at the group.

"Oh right, let's shine the light on the suicidal guy. Everybody already knows what happened to me, I don't know why the hell I have to do this whole confessional thing. It's humiliating."

Calvin, always the peacemaker, reached out his diaphanous, white-silver arm, a ghoulish draping of dead flesh over dry bone, and touched his friend Tom on the shoulder.

"It's not like that, Tom," said Calvin. "Sure, everybody knows what you did. But none of us understand *why* you did it. And that's all we want. Is to understand. We got a long time ahead of us to knock around together and--"

"Let's not get into that yet," said Wilbur. He had been quiet and just observing up till this point. "You know, Richard is not actually dead yet. And we aren't supposed to be talking about those things in too much detail. You guys know that."

Richard Bachman, poised just a few short hours from his own death, smiled, fascinated, but knowing better than to push his luck.

"All right," said Tom, touching the massive gash in the side of his skull awkwardly. It was still, strangely, a bright, bloody red. "I guess that would be good. Good to get things off my chest."

"Should we draw straws, like we used to?" said Wilbur, excitedly. "I could pull some pieces of paper from the group journal and we could--"

"Oh for Pete's sake, we aren't twelve anymore," barked Butch. "Cripes, I'll go first."

"Good," said Tom, "And can we move it along please? I don't feel like hanging around in the past. What the hell is the point of the afterlife anyway, if we're all going to spend it wallowing around in crap we've already suffered through?"

"Alright then," said Butch. "But I didn't start out suffering. I was lucky, I was the quarterback--"

"Which doesn't exactly explain why you hung around with us," said Calvin.

“Yeah! You ‘oddballs’. ‘Losers’. ‘Kids from the wrong side of the track’,” gibed Butch. “At least ... that’s how my parents always described you. Hell, that’s how all the parents of all the kids on my block, and on my team, and in my world, up on the high hill above town--they all talked trash about you guys. And I’m not sure if it was me rejecting them, or them rejecting me--subconsciously, it was all very subtle, you know. But they knew I was different. I knew I was different. It never got ugly, in our home. But this was my real home. This tree house was my home.”

Butch paused and took another swig from the Ball jar.

“And then, like I said, you guys pretty much know the rest. I signed with a team that had been to the Super Bowl three times, and that was before I joined. Earning my own ring was pretty damn great. Not bad for a kid from a small town with a population of twelve hundred and eighty-one people. I did well. I won’t insult you guys by reciting stats. But what you guys don’t know is that I was miserable the whole time. I was never happy. I was never happy. Well, that’s not entirely true. There were moments in my life when I was in a state of absolute bliss. When I was with him. But when I wasn’t with him, I was living a lie, and spending most of my time terrified that everybody would find out.

Anyway, one day, Danny and I were out in the woods, up behind our house. And we were just sitting on that little bridge that goes over the creek there. We weren’t doing anything, just holding hands. And suddenly this little boy appears out of nowhere, holding a fishing pole, and he looks for all the world like Opie Taylor. And he just stares at me kind of sideways, and he says, ‘Aren’t you Butch Campbell, the quarterback?’ Well, the sight of that kid surprised the hell out of us--we were just kind of frozen, still holding hands--and before I could think, I said ‘yes’. And that kid looked at me . . . and then he looked at our hands clasped together, me and Danny, and the kid just gave me

the oddest look. It wasn't negative, or even judgmental, it was more just . . . confused. Really confused.

And I decided that day that I couldn't live a lie anymore. I'm not even going to claim that it was some noble thing, or that I wanted to be an example for other gay kids. It was more like, well, I was just being selfish, I was tired of living with the terror of being found out. So my agent arranged a big interview with ESPN. And that's where I saw you for the last time Richard, and by the way, you were so supportive. You have always been there for me.”

“Right back at'cha.” mumbled Richard awkwardly.

“I don't care what you say, Butch,” offered Calvin, “I thought coming out like that was incredibly brave.”

The other ghosts all nodded in agreement. For a moment, there was only silence. Silence, peppered with a few forest noises. Butch sighed, and resumed his story.

“And then, as fate would have it, I died before my time. And Danny died way before his time. The irony of it is, we were so happy up till then. I had retired and I was working for these different causes. Danny and I were going to adopt, the paperwork was filed and everything, and we lived in a beautiful house, and life was large and love was the law of our world. But little did we know that, thanks to that evil bastard who controlled so much of the country back then, we were sitting not only next to his country club, but right on top of a toxic waste dump. With all the regulators paid off handsomely. Danny and I both got cancer.”

“Yeah, you know when I read that you died, Butch, my first reaction was to get kind of angry at you, for not telling your friends about that when you were still in the land of the living. You know, so we could say our goodbyes, and stuff.” Richard sat up from his reclining position and gestured with the Ball jar as he spoke.

“Yeah, well I notice you aren’t exactly surrounded by loved ones right now, on this your last night on earth,” quipped Butch, an edge to his voice.

“Fair enough. But I love you guys, doesn’t that count for something?” Chuckles all around.

“Finish your story, Butch.” This from Calvin. Butch sighed deeply, remembering back to the painful end.

“...Hell, in no time, sixty percent of the people living in that housing development had cancer. I watched so many of them suffer. They were dead by the time we won the lawsuit. How ironic it was that Danny and I lived in a time when we didn't have to worry about dying from some horrible, sexually transmitted disease, just greed, corruption and toxic waste. But life has been, or perhaps I should say the afterlife has been--or perhaps I shouldn't say anything at all. I keep forgetting, Richard is not one of us yet. And there are rules. Anyway, that's pretty much my story. So who's next?”

There was an awkward silence. It was Richard who finally spoke.

“Tom, why don't you go? Tell us your story, get it over with.”

“He's right,” said Butch. “Look, everybody here knows what happened. You blew your brains out with a big bad goddamn gun. You, of all people, who didn't even like hunting when you were a kid. Hell, to most of the kids in this town, hunting was a religion.”

“And everybody knows all about *her*,” added Wilbur. This big epic love of your life. And the horrible way it all ended. So the only thing left is all the stuff you've been wanting to get off your chest for so long.”

Chubby Calvin, corpulent even as a corpse, said nothing, but reached over and put his hand on Tom's shoulder, or what was left of it. The bony clavicle.

“They're right, Tom. You'll feel better after you get it out.”

“Okay,” sighed Tom. “Here goes. Although I'm not sure I have anything new to add. I mean, it was pretty much all over the tabloids. It started with that call. I had only been mayor for a few months, and it was going really well.”

“I remember you always did have political aspirations,” said Wilbur, gesturing with his strange broken akimbo arms, an act that made his ghost look even stranger, “Because ever since we were all kids hanging out in this treehouse, you said you wanted to be President of the United States someday. And you might have climbed that high, too--”

“Hey, don't interrupt him,” said Richard. “This is hard enough for him.”

“You're right,” said Wilbur. “Sorry, Tom.”

“Anyway, the phone call . . .” continued Tom, punctuating every other phrase with a deep sigh. It was obvious to all of his friends who were listening earnestly that even in death, Tom was still very much in love.

“Things were going well in the mayor's office, and I had very high hopes for everything, and then I get this call out of the blue. From Hollywood, from freaking Hollywood, can you believe it? I couldn't. It seemed too good to be true. Apparently, unbeknownst to any of us, some location scouts had come through town, looking for a place to shoot a major feature film. Look, we've always been damn proud of how beautiful this town is. Is there a prettier place in all of New England? They talked about how they wanted to shoot a major feature film here, and they were ready to send the legal department ahead early with a lot of papers and promised perks, all of which ended up coming through without a hitch. So at least I got that going for my legacy. Anyway, two months later, Margo Carole drives into town in that gorgeous 1956 pink convertible, scarf tied over her hair like she's some screen siren from the fifties, Sandra Dee or something. And I'm there on the steps of city hall

waiting for her. And the minute I saw her, I fell so damn hard for her. I didn't know that kind of love existed. You kind of have to feel sorry for Darla Baker--”

“Childhood sweetheart. Don't we all remember,” said Richard, chuckling.

“It was Darla popped your cherry, wasn't it?” said Butch.

“True that,” said Tom, smiling sadly. “I can still remember to this day. The night of the day that Margo Carole came to town, I had a date with Darla. And Darla took one look at me and she knew. She scowled at me and she said, ‘You've fallen in love with her, haven't you? I expected a minor crush, but you're already in over your head, you bastard!’ Good old Darla was always wise beyond her years. Darla and I tried to keep it going for another few weeks, at the beginning of the movie shoot, but we both knew. I felt guilty, but I couldn't do anything, because I was so in love with Margo. And you have to admit, it turned out pretty great for Darla. She got sick of me and sick of this town and she went to New York and ended up being a famous lawyer who got herself on the Sunday news shows almost once a week. Rich, lives near Central Park, has herself a handsome husband and a bunch of kids. So it was all for the best. If she and I had gotten married, she would have been defending DUIs and shoplifters in this tiny town. She would have been miserable.”

“You're rationalizing, you dirty dog,” jibed Butch.

“Whatever,” sniped Tom. “Anyway, you guys know most of the story, right? The movie wrapped. It was a big hit. And you all remember that--”

“-- we all remember that a big part of the huge publicity push was the fact that the beautiful, famous, Hollywood movie star had fallen in love with a small-town mayor!” said Richard.

“Yeah!” added Calvin excitedly. “It was all pretty surreal. It was like Marilyn Monroe or Elizabeth Taylor or Hedy Lamarr coming into town and

falling in love with Jimmy Stewart. Only not Jimmy Stewart the famous movie star, Jimmy Stewart playing some small town schlub in 'It's a Wonderful Life', you know what I mean?"

"Yeah," said Tom. "That's exactly what it was like. And the thing is . . . I think that from the very beginning, she really did love me. And I think that she kept loving me, and our love grew, and she loved me right up to the end. And I couldn't believe it. I mean I believed it, but I didn't believe it, you know?"

"Yeah, we know." Murmurs of assent from all.

"And of course, the movie was a huge hit. And then we had the inevitable discussion about whether or not we should live here, or move to Hollywood. Me in Hollywood, can you believe it? Anyway, she refused to hear about us moving to Los Angeles. She loved it here. I mean really loved it. I was ready to move out west to make a life with her. But she wanted to live here. In between making movies, of course. And of course, that was the problem. Even when I would go with her on a shoot, I became the old cliché . I couldn't stand the thought of her playing out these fake romances with these handsome movie stars. And kissing them. And oh my God, being naked in bed with them. Even if there was a crew of two dozen people standing around filming it, and it was all very innocent. But she always seemed so very into it."

"It's called acting," said Richard.

"Yeah, I know. I know," sighed Tom.

Butch chuckled.

"It reminds me of those stories of how Joe DiMaggio used to get so jealous of Marilyn, like when she was in New York filming 'Some Like It Hot' and she was standing on the subway grate--"

"Seven Year Itch." said Richard.

"Huh?" said Butch.

“The subway scene was from 'Seven Year Itch', not 'Some Like It Hot',” corrected Richard, ever the filmophile, even in death.

“Whatever,” said Butch. “The point is that Marilyn, the most beautiful woman in the world, and this beloved baseball player, had a whirlwind romance, fell in love, got married, but he couldn't stand the thought of her kissing these movie stars. And when they shot that scene of the burst of wind from the subway blowing her white dress up, they say DiMaggio just lost it. A month later, they're divorced.”

“Yeah, but that didn't stop Joe DiMaggio from having fresh roses placed on her grave three times a week for twenty years after the poor lady kills herself,” said Tom. “Margo loved that story.”

“Not 'kills herself',” said Richard, “Was murdered!”

“Really?” said Butch, titillated.

“Yeah,” said Richard, with a knowing wink. “I know what I know. And I know people. But this is not the time or the place. This is Tom's time.”

“Yeah, thanks Richard, but the truth is, it was exactly like that,” said Tom. “Except in my case, Margo Carole did not file for divorce. She just loved me right through it. I had never met a woman like that in my life. And then, there was the whole money thing. You know she's raking in ten million dollars a movie, and I'm making forty-seven grand a year as mayor. And, just like everything else, it didn't bother her. But it bothered the hell out of me.

So. The next part, you guys probably know about. She's commuting back and forth between La La Land and our humble town. And she's just happy as hell. And I'm happy as hell, even though the whole money thing is bothering me. But I'm getting laid by the most beautiful woman on the planet. People Magazine even said so. Although they didn't quite phrase it like that. And who am I to question People Magazine? Everybody thought it was the greatest love story of the decade or whatever.

And then, the triple whammy hit. She was one of the people caught up in that ponzi scheme. Remember that horrible guy who ripped off so many people for over a billion dollars? She was one of the people who got ripped off, and it left her pretty much broke. Hell, the worst you could have accused her of is bad judgment, or putting all her eggs in one basket. And then, when the poor thing figures out what she's got left, she realizes that her accountant has been bleeding her dry too. Margo's problem was not that she was stupid, just way too trusting. I loved that woman, but she did not have the greatest judgment in people. Maybe that's why she chose me, maybe that's why she loved me. But the miracles just kept on coming. In spite of losing everything, she was happy. She lost her big house in Beverly Hills, but she was happy to crash in a dressing room during shoots, and spend the rest of her time in our house here in town. She scored some quick movie roles that got her out of debt. And she was so chipper. Damn, she was the happiest person I had ever met.

And then she got into that accident. My poor girl had such lousy luck, it wasn't even her fault. Rear-ended by another famous actor, who was drunk and high out of his mind. I don't give a shit that it ruined his career, but it ruined my baby's career. Even if you could get beyond her face, even if she had become that kind of actress whose characters were enriched by the scars she had, still, her poor body just wasn't up to it. I mean, she could walk, she could get around all right, but the grueling regime of a movie shoot--she said it just caused her too much physical pain, and she didn't want to become addicted to pain pills. You know, because of her mother. That story is all too well-known. So about a year goes by. She isn't acting, and we're poor as church mice."

"No, that's not true--" said Calvin.

"I know, you're right. But poor by Hollywood standards. What she was used to, poor thing, all of her life until then. And even though she was not the happy person she used to be, she *still* said she loved me. It was me who

couldn't handle it. I couldn't stand to see her life humbled, to see her choices so limited. Look, you guys know that I was always a weird kid, struggling with what we later found out was clinical depression. Well, my depression got worse and worse, even though at her urging, I was in therapy for it. And I remember one day--it was after a good day, even, it was after the big Cork & Fork Festival that we hold here--I just decided to kill myself.

But I wasn't going to kill myself over depression, no, this was a practical thing. You see, one of the things that Margo had insisted on, when we got married, was not a prenup--no, can you believe that? When I brought it up, that we should have one, to protect her, because she was the rich one, you know--she insisted no, no prenup. She said it was far too cynical a move to make about love; she said it felt like inviting bad luck, like a curse. But she did insist that we both get a life insurance policy. I don't know why I didn't have one before. No family, I guess, money had been tight and I was young when I was elected, I thought I was going to live forever. Remember when I was elected, it made the papers, only 29 years old. Fourth youngest mayor ever in the United States. Anyway, Margo and I had these new policies. Which, as you know, don't cover accidents for the first two years. But. . .But. .

I knew that if I could just make my death look like an accident, my sweet baby would have five million dollars coming her way. If it's suicide, my policy is clear--no money. But if I could pull it off, she would never have to work again. She could just work on the projects she was interested in, like Broadway shows, because she was really getting into the theater. Artsy fartsy, gritty stuff, you know, because of the scars. And I had that huge policy because of my dad being a banker, he always drilled things like that into my head. So I planned it all out.

I put some affairs in order, but not nearly as many affairs, nor in nearly as much order as you would expect. Because the point was, it was supposed to

look like an accident right? In fact, it's kind of funny, I remember that I purposely left certain matters in my life wide open, unfinished, the kinds of things that would make people say “Oh dear, it must have been an accident, because if he intended to kill himself, he would have taken care of that’. And I know, I know, you're thinking about the effect that it would have on the people around me. Didn't I think about that? Well, you guys know that I was a very young man when I was elected mayor. You guys know I never had a family. I remember at the ten year reunion, you guys all had family to brag on. But I didn't. I was the mayor of the town. And my father was dead, my mother had dementia, I didn't have any kids or siblings, and there was only Margo to leave behind. And I just knew she would be better off without me, and with the five million dollars. I know that seems like a mercenary thing to say, and maybe that is the depression talking, that's what I thought at the time. So, and I guess it's kind of anti-climactic, I walked into that old art deco building that has a veterinarian's office on the bottom floor, the one that the town had bought and refurbished, as an effort to gentrify our town towards tourism, and I took the elevator to the top floor, where they were working and there was all the scaffolding, and I walked onto the scaffolding--and this is important, Richard, you'll appreciate this kind of detail--I didn't jump. You know, in case anybody was watching from a distance. I just made it look like I lost my footing. And then I went down.”

He was silent for a moment. Tom did not make eye contact with anybody. Richard Bachman spoke up softly.

“I think we all know this next part, Tom.”

Tom sighed heavily, and then continued. “And I couldn't even do that right. I couldn't even off myself, without screwing it up.”

“You hit the awning below, and then tore through to the pavement, but the awning had broken your fall just enough that it didn't kill you. It just--”

“Paralyzed me. Put me in a wheelchair for the rest of my life. Needless to say, Margo wasn’t going to get her five million dollars. But then, time took care of the problem—like time always does, I guess. We passed the two year mark on the life insurance. They would cover suicide. And I was up for it. Margo wouldn’t admit it, but I had made her life a living hell. So I figure, what the hell. Let’s go old school. I would just blow my brains out. Poor Margo, she thought she had outsmarted me in this regard. She had gotten rid of all the guns in the house. She knew I was suicidal. What poor Margo did not know was that I had guns hidden all over the house; my dad had always taught me to have one on each floor, because of when we were all kids and that Waterfall Slasher was killing all those people in little towns? Anyway. Anyway. Margo is gone, she’s going to be down all day, and now it’s my goal to get to the basement, the last gun that she didn’t know about. And yes, it was humiliating. I had to get out of the wheelchair and crawl down the damn stairs. It took a while, but I did it.

So there I am. I’m downstairs in the basement, making a beeline for the hidden gun. But it’s tucked in a wall space behind this old trunk, so I open the old trunk, you know, I’m going to take some stuff out, to make it easier to move, and what do I find but a bundle of Margo’s love letters, you know, she had gathered them all together—we actually hand wrote notes and send romantic cards and all that crap, while we were, well, courting? Man that sounds corny. And so I start reading through them. Do you know she actually had them all bundled up and tied with a ribbon. A ribbon for Christ's sake, how old timey Victorian is that? And I'm reading, and I'm reading, and it's so romantic I'm blubbering like a baby, and then I get this idea in my head, that I don't want to die! Seriously, I don't want to die. Even in this stupid damn wheelchair, what was I thinking, I have this beautiful woman who loves me, and I love her, and people live out full rich lives in wheelchairs all the time. And

I'm getting excited, because for the first time in months, maybe years I want to live.

And I start thinking and planning all these things that I'm going to do, that she and I can do together, and that's when I smelled the smoke. Yes I said the smell.

But you guys know about that and you know what caused it? You know what caused it? According to the fireman it was the cat, it was her damn cat. You know I never liked that cat. I'm not a cat person. Anyway it turns out that cats start hundreds of fires a year by flicking on some switches on an electric stove and stuff overheats and Wawa mayor flambé. So the fire is spreading and now I can see it at the top of the stairs, and I'm screaming, and I don't have my phone, and the fire is approaching, but everything's going to be okay, I think to myself because I can hear the sirens in the background. The fire truck is coming. But they didn't come fast enough. And I guess you know the rest. They found me, and when they found me I was a crispy critter.

Richard Bachman furrowed his brow.

“But the autopsy said—all the papers said—”

“Yes, yes, I know, they said that I died of a gunshot wound, for chrissake I know—I should know it, I am the one who pulled the trigger. See, the thing is . . .even though I could hear ambulances in the distance, the key word there is ‘distance’. I spent the last few seconds of my life debating—would rescue come in time, or would I be burned to death. Then, finally, when the fire was a few inches from me, I ate the bullet. In the moment, it seemed far preferable to being licked to death by flames. So here I am. In all my glory.

There was another awkward silence. Finally, it was Richard who spoke.

“Jesus. I have spent my life having just the right words, finding just the right words. But your story makes me realize how much of my life I spent immersed in fiction. When crap like that happens to one of my characters, it's

usually a character you hate. Or there's some upside, some satisfying end game. But you were a good man, Tom, and your story is just heartbreaking.”

And then, Richard Bachman did something he had only done a few times in his lifetime. He began to cry. Perhaps it was suddenly remembering that his own death was imminent. Or perhaps it was just the compassion of knowing what had happened to his good friend. But the feelings overwhelmed him.

Tom suddenly felt remorse, over what had seemed like a story of profound self-pity and selfishness.

“Hey Richard, look it's not that bad. And all that crap my Catholic Aunt used to tell me about suicide? It's not like that at all. In fact the first thing that happened after I died was--”

“Tick a lock!” said Calvin, glaring at Tom, and making a gesture as though he was locking his mouth shut.

“I get it, I get it,” said Richard. I ain’t dead yet.”

For a moment, nobody said anything. Crickets. It was Calvin who finally spoke.

“Well, okay, so we’ve heard from Butch. And Tom. So that leaves Wilbur and Richard and me.”

“I’ll go,” said Wilbur, “But I'm not looking forward to this, because I think after you hear my story, you guys are going to think I'm kind of a dick. A really big dick. Because the reason you don't know my story--and I guess everybody here has figured out this much--is that I dropped out of all your lives kind of on purpose. What I'm trying to say is that the reason you don't know what was going on in my life, is that I didn't want you to know. Or didn't want you to know me. Or . . . well . . . maybe I should just tell the story. OK, so here goes. Look, you guys know that all I ever wanted to be was an artist.”

“Yeah, I remember that,” said Tom, “After all, how many times did my dad arrest you for doing those graffiti murals on walls around town?”

“Hey, that was *art* man. Graffiti mural art had really come into its own. If I hadn't been born in this podunk town, if I'd been born in some place like New York or Los Angeles, I could have been famous for that graffiti.”

“No. You would have just been in brutal competition with every other tag artist who imagines he's going to be the next Basquiat. Without the heroin, of course,” quipped Richard.

“Yeah, but at least I would have been around people who understood me, and what I was trying to do.”

“That's why you disappeared, isn't it?” said Butch. “You left this town so you could reinvent yourself, didn't you? I can relate to that.”

“Yeah. Yeah, actually, that's exactly it. I never had your courage, Butch. I realize that in hindsight, my story does not make much sense. It must seem like there was a way for me to do this without being such a dick and abandoning all my friends. But then again, I didn't really have any family to abandon, remember? I mean, it may have been forever ago, but it always felt pretty raw to me. In life, at least. My mom had died of cancer, and dad had become a hardcore oxy addict. And one day, he just headed back to his family home in the Blue Ridge, because he didn't feel like taking care of me. So I wake up at sixteen, all alone. My older sister had run away. Never did find out what happened to her.”

“Yeah, I remember,” mused Calvin. “You were always terrified they'd find out that you were living in that shithole trailer all alone, and they'd stick you with some foster family.”

“Yup,” said Wilbur, his ghostly face nodding slowly. “I don't know why that thought scared me so much.”

“Now I remember-- they found out, just when you would have aged out anyway,” said Tom.

“That’s right,” said Wilbur. “And then, you guys remember this, I went to the community college and studied art. What a joke. I don't know what was worse, learning to paint perfect photographic oils like Thomas fucking Kinkade, or how to imitate perfectly the style of Van Gogh. So what's the point? Nobody there got it. Nobody in that stupid school got me, or art, for that matter. Shoot, anybody can paint like Van Gogh. Hell, even those poor workers in the Asian Gulag assembly lines who work sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, and make three Yen an hour, even they can learn to paint like Van Gogh.”

“- Renminbi.”

All of the ghosts turned to stare at Richard Bachman, annoyed.

“What?” “Renwhat?” “Huh?” “Excuse the fuck outta me?” They all murmured at once, talking over each other at the same time.

“It's the currency of China,” explained Richard. “Yen is Japanese currency. And they have a democracy. The gulag you refer to is a Chinese thing, and their form of currency is Renminbi. I mean, you aren't going to suggest that they're basically the same people and the same cultures, are you?”

“Richard, you can really be an asshole sometimes, you know that?” said Tom. “Wilbur, please continue.”

“OK, I was just trying to make a point, and my point is that any yahoo can learn to *imitate* Van Gogh. That's art school 101. But before that style could be born, somebody had to have the courage, the undiluted genius, to break away from the photographic, literalistic, straightjacket painting tradition of ultra realism, and see the world the way Van Gogh saw it, man. *To see* the Starry Night the way that Vincent did, *to see* the golden warmth of the Night Cafe providing solace in the long dark midnight of the soul. *To see* the nobility

in a pair of peasant shoes. *To see* the madness in your own mind, and render it perfectly in a self-portrait featuring streaks of teal and olive and umber, with nary a brush stroke of fleshtones, capturing your own quintessential insanity to perfection, even after you've cut off your own ear. I think the point is, I think the goddamn point is, in order *to be Van Gogh*, to be the first person on the planet to break away from the old school, to paint like that, you had to have eaten a big bowl of crazy for breakfast every morning for a lifetime, in order to create something like that. Nobody gets it! The agony! The sacrifice! *To see* the crows in that wheatfield, and transform them with a mere brush stroke into the chaotic embodiment of any everyman's worst nightmares . . .”

They are all silent for a moment.

“Geez, Wilbur,” said Calvin. “I thought you were just going to tell us again about how you hated that art teacher because of your theory that he always farted near your desk on purpose.”

More silence. Then Richard and the ghosts all busted out laughing. Wilbur lightened up, then continued his story.

“I was so frustrated, it was a crazy time. It even got me into drugs for a while, like you. Richard, but I got out of that real fast. I did not want to be another Basquiat. But I also knew that I was never going to be an artist studying at that college, living in this town. So I moved to the state capital a couple of hours away, and tried to make something of myself there. And I made a living, sure. But really stupid stuff, like painting holiday scenes in shop windows and crap like that. Leaving this town didn't change much. I guess the last time we all saw each other was at the ten year reunion, you guys remember that?”

They all hooted with delight.

“Man, the stuff we pulled at that reunion!” said Calvin, cackling. “That poor ostrich! I guess we're the reason the pet-a-pet shut down.”

“Calvin, let Wilbur finish,” offered Butch quietly.

“So anyway,” continued Wilbur, “That whole business of me coming back here for the reunion . . . don't take this wrong, guys, but I realized that if I had any chance of making it, it wasn't going to be enough for me to move to some big hip city. I needed to reinvent myself. And not just create a new image, but in my own head. That's why I turned my back on everybody . . . on what was left of my toxic family, and on this town, and even on you guys, I'm sorry to say. I couldn't be the person I was growing up. It was just too crappy and painful and banal and, well, anyway, I'm rambling. So I moved to New York City, and I was instantly able to get some gigs. And then I hopscotched between Los Angeles and the Big Apple, until I decided, what the hell, man, I was going to go live in Paris! Oh, since we're confessing things here, I guess I forgot the biggest confession of all. And that was the fact that I changed my name.”

“You know, I had a feeling you did that,” said Richard, “Because for the longest time, when I wanted us to all get together, I tried to track you down. I even had a friend in the business of tracking people down, he's one of the best. He tried to find you, and he couldn't. But now, that all makes sense.”

“Hey, Richard, wouldn't you change your name if it was Wilbur?” asked Tom sympathetically.

“Exactly Tom, I mean who the hell names their kid ‘Wilbur?’” said Wilbur. “I heard rumors in my family that I had a relative named Wilbur, but apparently he was one of the last people to be imprisoned in Alcatraz before they closed it. That's one hell of a legacy. So yes, when I moved to Paris, that's when I made it official. I found myself a new name. And the new name was, uhm, stirkwdcrcnsimn.”

“Huh?” the rest of them said at once. It was almost as though Wilbur had purposely swallowed his own words.

“The new name that I chose for myself was, uh, Stryker Wade Kingston.”

Gales of laughter erupted in the shadowy treehouse. Butch, Tom, Richard, and Calvin all rolled around on the floor, and whenever Wilbur tried to resume his story, they burst out in renewed gales of laughter, and Wilbur could not go on.

“I swear to God,” said Calvin, “If my ghostly form had the ability to shoot milk through my nostrils and wet myself from laughing, that's what would be happening right now.”

Wilbur rolled his eyes.

“Sure guys, laugh it up. Okay, so my attempt to reinvent myself is ridiculous to you punks. But it worked. Seriously, it worked. All of a sudden I am creating all these weird, wonderful pieces, like someone else is inside of me, creating them. And commissions! In Paris, I had more work than I could handle. Sculptures and paintings, outdoor exhibitions, and installation art.”

“Hey, that's great! We never knew.” said Calvin.

“Yeah,” said Richard. “I'm sorry about laughing before. We all are. Hey, whatever you gotta do.”

“Yeah, I mean, if anyone understands what it's like to have to reinvent yourself, I do,” said Butch.

“Yeah, and if anybody is not in a position to judge somebody else for following their passions, it's me,” said Tom.

“Pretty good story so far,” said Richard, smiling wryly.

“Thanks guys,” said Wilbur. “Actually, coming from you guys, that really means a lot. Anyway, so by this time--oh, I had just celebrated my thirty-fifth birthday, and a bunch of my friends all took me to dinner at Le Cinq. My Lord, that might have been the best meal I have ever eaten in my life. And I've eaten some great meals. In fact, when I got to Paris, it was one of my grand goals to eat at every restaurant in the Michelin guide--”

“Enough with the pretension, Wilbur. It's us you're talking to,” said Tom.

“Right. Sorry. So as I was saying, seriously, it was a strangely melancholy night, my thirty-fifth birthday, because I remember that my mother had died of cancer right on her thirty-fifth birthday. How creepy is that? But I was also excited, because I had been invited to be a part of the biggest installation group show of all time. You've got to remember, we're going back a couple of decades here, and the world was still reeling from the effects of that horrible wannabe dictator, who somehow managed to become President of the United States. I mean, damn, we're supposed to be a democracy--”

“A Republic.”

Again, all eyes were on Richard, as the ghosts muttered. Richard looked at them awkwardly and shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, sorry guys, but contrary to the belief of the unwashed hordes, this country is not a democracy. Sure, I understand that some people think it's a democracy in spirit. But in point of fact, we are a republic. More specifically, the United States of America is a constitutional federal republic securing through its founding documents a federation of states with a representative democracy.”

“Did we mention what an asshole you can be?” said Butch, and the rest applauded him.

“Just sayin'...” muttered Richard.

“Does anybody mind if I get back to my life story?” asked Wilbur, bristling. “So anyway, you all probably remember that our beloved President, who shocked the hell out of the world by somehow getting elected to a third term, was managing to prop up all these other world dictators, and the world seemed like it was going to hell in a handbasket, and a lot of folks were pretty

angry. So a coalition of artists from all over the world decided that they were going to do this massive installation show, not all in one place, but international. The theme was anti-censorship. You'll recall, censorship seemed to be popping up everywhere, in places all over the planet, so this was going to be an anti-censorship show. And if you remember one of the things that people were really upset about was the fact that anything sexual was being censored. Gays, LGBT, even just regular sex, it always seem to be subject to weird kinds of censorship here and there. So, since I was living in Paris, and Paris seemed to be the one stronghold where everybody still loved sex and was very public about sex and hated the sex censorship, I got the commission to do the Paris anti-censorship installation. Now, I don't know if any of you guys remember--"

Suddenly Richard Bachman burst into laughter and slapped his thigh. He stared at Wilbur in disbelief.

"Wilbur-Stryker-Wade-Kingston- Clayton. Oh my God, I know where this is going. Now it all makes sense. And I realize where I know that name from, 'Stryker Wade Kingston'. The most bizarre tragedy to occur in the art world since Van Gogh decided to cut off his ear and give it to a prostitute!"

"Richard, are you going to let me tell the story, or do you want to finish it for me?"

Richard made a mock deferential bow, and Wilbur continued.

"So, since this is a huge installation piece, actually an outdoor installation piece, if that makes sense-- these Parisians decided that the most in-your-face thing they could say to the American president and all the tyrants he was supporting was to create a gigantic blow-up penis, and the whole point was that it would be as tall as the Eiffel Tower, and right next to the tower! Pink, fat, engorged. Erect. With helium. And I was in charge of the whole thing. Because it was as tall as the Eiffel Tower, we had these enormous cranes

and a walkway and such. So that I could go to the top of the crane and oversee things, you see? I guess maybe my mistake was having a couple of glasses of wine at lunch. Although it was a lovely white wine that I still remember to this day. Oh, how I miss Paris, mon dieu!”

“*Wilbur!*” This from all of them.

“Yes, well, I don’t think I was tipsy, but--”

“Wait, I know this,” said Calvin, “You went toppling!”

“I lost my footing and I fell off the crane and yes, I went toppling. And it wasn't enough for me to just go headfirst into my own installation art sculpture. I had to nick myself on a couple of buildings along the way, you know, outcroppings, making sure to also hit a gargoyle or two . . . so by the time I hit my own sculpture and went head first into it--the irony is, I would have been okay, because what I fell into was half way blown up and cushioned my fall, but the thing is, I had broken so much of my body and my limbs along the way, that when I landed head-first, I couldn't raise myself up to breathe, my arms weren’t working . . . so by the time rescue workers got to me, I had suffocated. They tried to save me but my body was lifeless. Ain't that the irony? It wasn't the fall that killed me. It was not being able to breathe.”

It was the kind of story that you just couldn't believe. It was so bizarre, you figured somebody *had* to be making this story up, and you just wouldn't believe it unless--*unless*--it had been a big international headline.

In that dark and shadowy treehouse, the titters started gently at first, following a moment of horrified and amused shock. And then the titters grew to chuckles, and the chuckles exploded into guffaws. It was Butch, gay hero in his lifetime, who asked the question everybody was thinking.

“And so, because you fell into something balloony--and we are dealing with a sculpture of a giant penis here--am I to understand that you fell from the crane into one of the balls?” This from Tom.

“Now I remember!” said Richard. “I can still see the headline, the newspapers put it so delicately--of course none of us knew it was you at the time--but hell, that's a memorable story no matter who it happens to. The newspapers say you died from ‘suffocating in one of the giant pink testicles.’ What a way to go!”

More howls of laughter.

“Oh. My. God.” said Calvin. “Dude, that's the kind of thing that nobody ever lives down. Not in this life, and not in the next. That's your legacy, man, you do realize that right?”

“Yes. I realize that.”

The titters and guffaws went on and on and on.

“I remember now,” said Butch. “We were watching it from the locker room. It's all coming back to me: this footage of them bringing this device to sort of lift you out and down. Man, Wilbur, the whole world was laughing at you. You were dead. At the top of your game, the prime of your life, and you died tragically. The world couldn't stop laughing.”

“Alright, alright, I know. I get it. But hey, I still created some great art. At least I have a legacy.”

“Hey Wilbur,” asked Calvin, “What happened when you had to tell that story to the committee--”

Suddenly the others cut him off, glancing over at Richard.

“I know, I know,” said Richard. “There's stuff I'm not supposed to know yet.”

Their laughter subsided into silence. They could hear a chorus of crickets, chirping peacefully in the woods. Moonlight filtered through the cracks in the roof. It was sublime. It felt right. And Richard Bachman was still very much alive.

Richard cleared his throat and spoke. “So. We've done the big gay quarterback comes out of the closet and almost lives happily ever after. We've done the tragic story of the man who dared to love a Hollywood star. We've even done the bizarre tale of an artist who suffocated inside a giant rosy scrotum.”

Before he could finish the sentence, everybody in the treehouse, except of course Wilbur, burst out into renewed gales of laughter.

It was Butch who spoke next. He stared at Richard, and all eyes followed:

“Look, Rich, we could all say that we heard enough about you, back while we were still alive, for ten lifetimes! And that would be true. But we never got the whole story about Gus Pillsbury.”

Richard immediately got defensive and took a swig.

“What are you talking about? It was in all the papers. Crap, I thought that story would never go away. Every day, Oi! It stole the damn headlines from war, fire, flood, and famine.”

“Fame, that’s why. You forgot that very particular ‘F’ word,” said Calvin. “People cannot hear enough about the crap that happens to famous people. Guess it makes our own lives seem less tawdry.”

Richard Bachman rolled his eyes and sighed too loudly.

“Okay. Okay. You want to hear the whole Gus Pillsbury story? Here goes. Alright, you all know the public part, about his grisly death—”

“Oh my God, yes!” said Butch. “That is absolutely the last way in the world I would want to die, I can tell you. I thought that way before I heard about the whole Gus Pillsbury thing.”

“Gives me shivers,” said Tom.

“Of all the ways to choose to die. . .” opined Calvin.

“Crispy critter,” added Wilbur.

Richard nodded, drank deeply, then continued:

“And you know how he was trying to take credit for my books?”

They all nodded together in unison, like a row of Bobblehead Dolls on a shelf.

“And the reason he was so bent on revenge,” said Butch, leaning in and resting his bony chin on his bony wrist, “Was because you sued his ass off.”

“True that,” said Richard, “That much was common knowledge.”

“Cripes, it couldn’t help but be common knowledge,” said Wilbur. “He was driving around in that van that said ‘RICHARD BACHMAN KILLED JOHN LENNON.’ What a nutcase.”

“Oh no doubt. *Sincerely*,” said Calvin, invoking his signature adverb.

“And is it true, the rumor? That you guys settled privately and he owed you a shitload of money because of that book he wrote?”

“Yes, it’s true. It could have gone a lot worse for him; we settled for ten grand, and my lawyer kept telling me I could have gotten a quarter of a million.”

“And you should have held out for it, too,” said Butch. “I mean, imagine, claiming that you shot John Lennon!”

“Well, I have to admit. When Pillsbury published the pictures side by side—you and Chapman—there was quite a resemblance.”

“Ask yourselves, guys—have you ever seen them together?” Tom queried, guffawing as he did.

Bachman threw a handful of dead bugs, scraped up from the treehouse floor, at the ghost of Tom. Laughter all around.

“The thing is,” Richard said, “His big defense was that it was a work of fiction. And it was—inasmuch as I sure as hell didn’t kill anybody. The mistake was he used my almost identical name, and the description of me pretty much fit the bill.”

“But didn’t Gus write the book under a penname? Steve Darkfinger, wasn’t that it?”

“Well, I will tell you this much. It was bizarre as a book,” said Wilbur, “But when he started driving around in that van, with the signs plastered on it, saying ‘RICHARD BACHMAN KILLED JOHN LENNON’, then it was no longer just guerilla marketing. It was very weird.”

Richard sighed before responding.

“Well, all I know is that it started a vendetta that nearly destroyed me.”

And then, Richard started telling the story. *Finally:*

“You know, if Gus Pillsbury had written one single book that was half as wicked, half as imaginative, half as evil, as what he planned to do to me, he would have been considered a really great writer. Or at least, a great author in the horror genre. That's the irony. Can you get the irony?”

“We’re with you, Rich,” said Tom. “But give us the gory details! The newspapers were so vague!” said Tom, like someone waiting for a movie review.

“By the way, that was three halves, Rich.” This from Calvin.

Richard rolled his eyes.

“Tom, the details were vague on purpose. I begged them to *please* be vague. Because you know what happens after some crap like that comes down? Some *other* psycho fan comes up with something even more batshit crazy. So anyway, Gus Pillsbury’s scheme, in a nutshell, was this: somewhere he had

read, in an interview I gave, that I always made my original notes for a book in old-fashioned longhand, in an old-fashioned blank journal. It started out as a habit that got hard wired in from my days in the Coast Guard, and later the Merchant Marines. . .”

“Yeah, by the way, I never would have pictured you in those gigs.”

“I guess I was trying to impress my father. I mean, there was no great enemy, no World War II that I could trot off too—I just thought that if I served in some capacity—”

“You were trying to impress a father who left you when you were two?”

“I guess, I don’t know. Until I had some weird epiphany—”

“An epiphany that told you to become a dairy farmer?”

“What can I say, I like the idea of having all the ice cream I could eat.”

“Until you realized that you were supposed to be a writer all along?”

“Hmm. I guess something like that.”

“And by then, you had a stack of journals filled with ideas, short stories?”

“Yup. But I also had Inez. I don’t think I could have done it, if she hadn’t have believed in me. It was so sweet.

It started out as a sentimental thing with Inez; she’d get me a new blank journal every time I finished a book, or even a short story. She was so sweet that way. And then, I guess it just became a superstition with me. I felt that if I didn’t start that way, it wouldn’t be a good book. But, here’s the thing, I made the mistake of mentioning all of that in an interview. I always say too much in those damn things. . .”

Richard stopped talking for a moment. A sad, resigned expression washed over him.

“Uhm. . .I guess it's a little late to change that all now—but back to my story. So, all those journals are stored in the house, Inez had them stuck away along with some really old family photo albums. So when we were all on vacation, little did we know that wiley old Gus Pillsbury *knew* we had gone out of town, out of state, because even though we try to keep that kind of thing really private, it's creepy, man, these rabid fans have a way of finding that stuff out. So, as it turns out, Gus Pillsbury broke into the house and went through our things and he found all those journals. I guess the mistake we made was that they were packed away in boxes, so when we got back from vacation, it never occurred to us that we had been robbed. I mean, we hadn't really been robbed. Absolutely nothing was taken, nothing—except those journals. And we wouldn't have even known that those were missing, probably, unless what I'm about to tell you came to pass. Now nobody knew about this until after Gus Pillsbury was dead, but it came out that his master plan was to take credit for virtually everything I had ever written. And how would he do that? He would do that by taking all of my journals, and passing them off as his own. He even cut some of them up into smaller pieces and taped them to the cabin walls, like they were single ideas he had while taking a shower or walking his dog. He was good, I'll grant him that. He was thorough.”

“But that's ridiculous,” said Butch. “The journals were all in your handwriting.”

“Yeah,” mused Richard, “You'd think that would be the case. But as it happens, there really aren't a lot of samples of my handwriting around. Frankly, I can't remember the last time I wrote on anything but a keyboard. And if somebody were to ask me for a sample of my handwriting right now, today--”

Calvin interrupted him.

“Let me guess. Your handwriting has changed dramatically since the accident.”

Richard nodded with a grim smile.

“Gee, thanks for being so delicate in your phrasing, Calvin, I'm guessing that you're taking my feelings into consideration, but that was no accident. What happened to my hand in that cabin on that boiling hot summer day was no accident, that was—”

“--a crazed fan!” This from Wilbur. Like Tom, he talked about it all like it was some scene from a tv show or a movie, not some ghastly thing that had actually happened in someone's life.

“Exactly. And I know that you all know that, because that whole incident was made very public. Apparently, this crazed fan thought that a certain short story I wrote was made into such a horrible movie that somebody needed to be punished for it, and the obvious person to punish was me. So, this crazed fan breaks into the cabin, and nobody was even supposed to know where that cabin was—”

Wilbur leaned in excitedly.

“--And the crazed fan remembered exactly what happened to Jim's hand in the story, and did it to yours. Almost as though he was silencing you by taking your typing fingers.”

“Yes, Wilbur, thank you so much for that,” said Richard, wincing from the memory. “Fucking spawn of hell cuts off both of my index fingers. I never returned to that cabin, which pisses me off, because I loved that cabin. But I couldn't take any chances, because if one fan knew . . .and you never know, sometimes they come back. Now, where was I? Oh, anyway, as everybody knows, they were able to reattach my fingers, thank God, BUT, if there's one thing that didn't stay the same after that that incident– along with my state of

mind, my sanity, my relationship with my fans, my relationship with my sobriety--it was that the handwriting I have today resembles nothing that was in those journals. The journals that got stolen. So that was his evil plan.

By the way, speaking of secret cabins, Gus Pillsbury, for all the high-profile he gained over time, thought nobody knew about *his* hidden cabin. And almost nobody did. Except for some guy who ran a bait and tackle shop near his cabin that recognized him, but never said anything. Anyway, once investigators got into that cabin--you know, after Gus was dead--they realized that he had been working assiduously, learning how to imitate my old handwriting perfectly. In journals, letters that he purported to have written decades ago, that kind of thing. So from there, in Gus Pillsbury's plan, it was kind of a hop skip and a jump to claim that all of those ideas-- ideas that I had fleshed out in the journals--were actually, originally, his ideas, Gus Pillsbury's ideas. That I had stolen.

Now apparently his original plan was simply to humiliate me. Take me down finally and completely. But that was before Gus got hit by the twin freight trains of cancer, and embezzlement. They found out he had been embezzling. And from the Make-A-Wish Foundation, no less, can you believe that shit? And yes, to their credit, the investigators did ask me for other early samples, early samples of my handwriting. Brown--Steve Brown, yeah, that was his name--he was the lead investigator, and he did an amazing job. BUT. There's always a but. Except for those journals, which Gus stole, pretty much everything I've ever written for as long as I can remember came off of first, a typewriter, and then later, a word processor. Even some of my earliest love notes to Inez, I wrote on the typewriter. If you were to ask me why--and this is kind of embarrassing to admit--it's because I always figured one day I would be rich and famous, my writing would make it big, and Inez, you know, she's quite a fine writer as well, anyway, I figured that one day our love story, along

with the rest of my fascinating biography, would be turned into a book. You know, kind of like John and Abigail Adams. Do you know you can buy a whole book just of their letters to each other? Anyway, I would write things on the typewriter using, wait for it, don't mock me, carbon paper, back in the early days. As for other early samples of my handwriting, signatures and such, well my handwriting changed a lot over the years. Especially after the crazed fan—well, that part, you know.”

The ghosts all hovered in stony silence. Finally, it was Calvin who spoke.

“Wow. What a back story. Because everybody knows about how Gus died. But nobody knew until now, the story behind it.”

“So, Richard, what the hell was it like?” implored Tom, leaning in close. “I mean from the horse's mouth. I remember at the time, you were hesitant to talk about it. And I get that. I mean, a man lights himself on fire right in front of you? Was that like the scariest moment in your life or what?”

Richard thought about it a moment before he answered.

“Well, I won't say it was the scariest moment of my entire life. But I will say this, it was maybe the most surreal moment. Because when a man stands up, in the middle of a room full of people, while you're just trying to read an excerpt from your latest freaking novel, and then he sets himself on fire, you sure as hell feel like you've got to be on a movie set. Because that kind of thing just does not happen in real life. I mean, it just doesn't happen. OK, sure, maybe half a century ago, a Buddhist protesting the Vietnam War, or some fruit seller starting the Arab Spring. But that just doesn't happen in a bookstore in Maine. Except that it did.”

“I remember that. It was national news. International, really. You know, it could have been a lot worse,” offered Wilbur.

“True that,” nodded Richard. “The fire truck got there in no time, put it out before it could do too much damage. It did enough, though. Poor Gerald.

He and his kid nearly killed themselves putting that bookstore together; it was quite the finest ma 'n' pa bookstore I've ever seen. They lost a whole lot of first editions that they were storing in the basement. Some by that John Swithen guy. Never got why his books were such a big damn deal, to be honest. But anyway, like you said, it all could have been a hell of a lot worse. Hell, the whole town could have caught fire. Fire Chief McCauley deserved a medal. He got one, in fact, now that I remember it all."

The ghosts were listening, rapt, but Butch looked perplexed.

"Ok. So far, I agree with the first thing you said. This is one hell of a story, if it was something out of a Gus Pillsbury horror novel, like you said, Rich, he might have had something. But if there were—are—real samples of your handwriting around, from back in the old days, and if your handwriting has changed so much, where did Gus Pillsbury trip up? I mean even in death. Why did this Steve Brown guy not believe that those were Gus Pillsbury's journals?"

Richard smiled sadly and was quiet for a long moment before he answered. All the ghosts' eyes—such as they were—were on him.

"Well, not surprisingly, there's a woman to thank for that. My beautiful Inez. It turns out that my wonderful crazy wife, God Rest her soul, was making copies of all of these journals of mine, and so much more, behind my back. But not for any nefarious reasons, no, it was just because, well, she was a very organized person and she knew that I was going to make it big, and then after I did make it big, well she just figured she wanted backups of everything. In fact it all started way back before I'd even heard of Gus Pillsbury, back when I wrote the first few pages of "Prom Night". You know, everybody knows it, one of my first big hits, or big hit movie made from a book, about that poor little girl with the weird mom and the telekinesis, and they all make fun of her really cruelly, so she sets her entire prom on fire. But the truth is, I wrote that when I was

many sheets to the wind, back when my drinking was really bad. I remember looking at the title, “Prom Night”, and reading the first few pages. I thought it was trash, I thought it was just crap– but of course that was back when I was drinking and using twenty four–seven, so who knows what my judgment was good for, truth be told. But Inez found it in the trash, and the rest is history. So Gus Pillsbury figures that if I'm stupid enough to throw away a story that was destined to become a Blockbuster Movie, who knew what other great magnum opus I would throw away, while in the middle of a drunken binge? So, when the stories started coming out, Inez just produced this copy of all my journals, and... voila! Proof of Pillsbury's plot! The deep dysfunctional weirdness of Gus Pillsbury all came out. His evil plan and everything.”

Everybody was mute for a long, awkward moment. It was Calvin who broke the silence.

“And so that's it? That's the real story behind the self-immolation of Gus Pillsbury?” This from Tom.

“Yes, that's it. Except, of course, the part about Jane Spruce, the reporter who got the Pulitzer. I mean, it's not like I'm in competition with Jane Spruce. She's a journalist for God's sake, so of course she's eligible for the Pulitzer and me, technically I am too–a Pulitzer in literature, that is–but let's be real, angels will be flying out of my ass before that happens.”

“Okay,” said Calvin, “That is one thing I can assure you doesn't happen in the afterlife.”

“The truth of it is, Jane Spruce should have gotten a lot more awards than just a Pulitzer for her reporting. Who knows how many lives she saved? You see, she was the one who put it all together, and just in the nick of time. In fact, it was just like something out of a movie. I guess she had read just enough

of my stuff, God Love Her, and of Gus Pillsbury's stuff, to realize that maybe, just maybe, Gus had applied some of his wicked prose to real life. As in, he had wired the cabin to explode or something like that—if any of the authorities went in to find out everything that, well, they ultimately found out. It was Jane Spruce who remembered the end of that short story “Roadwork”, and she wondered if Gus might think that was the perfect revenge! You know, have the cabin blow up with everybody in it, once people swarmed in like vultures over carrion. To find out the truth about the life of Gus Pillsbury. If she hadn't warned everybody, literally at the last minute, before they stormed the cabin—oi, I hate to think!”

“And so is that it, then?” asked Wilbur.

“Well, there is one more small detail,” said Richard, with an odd grin on his face. “I don't know why, but I decided to go along with Gus Pillsbury's last wishes, even though they involved some effort on my part. And a road trip. You see, Gus left a kind of a will, in case things went south, which they were pretty sure to do, because if the embezzlement stuff didn't land him in prison, the cancer would land him in the coffin. So. . .funnily enough, his last wish was that he be cremated and that his ashes be strewn in Joyland, North Carolina. Specifically, a place called Xtreme Park Adventures, near the shore. And Gus further stipulated that his ashes should be strewn from the roller coaster. I was riding the roller coaster, and at the highest peak. I did it. Freed what was left of the poor son-of-a-bitch. Well, what can I say? I mean, it's not like the guy could do me any harm. It's not like his ashes were going to form into a hand and choke me on the ride. Although that's an interesting idea. . . For a story. . . but as I said, I guess those ideas, their time has passed. . .”

“Oh don't be so sure,” said Calvin, as the others cut him off.

Richard smiled oddly. He was getting the hang of this.

“And then, as you all know, I just–Inez and me–we just dropped out of sight for a long time.”

“Faking your death, and all.”

Richard rolled his eyes and nodded his head, as if to indicate something wishy-washy.

“Well. I wouldn’t say ‘faking our death’, as much as we were ‘faking faking our death’.”

“What the heck does that mean?” said Tom, the others following with similar questions.

“Well. It was Inez’s idea. See, fans of Gus Pillsbury–he did have a few–and political fans of that jerk Steve King–you know how things had been, politically–anyway, we actually made a lot of enemies. My publishers were even telling me it hurt book sales. So, in order to get some peace and quiet, maybe around some sympathy and excitement when we reappeared, we just kind of disappeared. Nothing illegal–it’s quite against the law to fake your own death–just the appearance of it. You remember. The ghastly boating accident, but no actual bodies. . .”

“Yeah, but were your kids in on it?” asked Calvin.

“Hmmm–the less people know about that, the better for my kids. Plausible deniability. I’d hate for the wrong person to tell the wrong person and they get in trouble. . .”

Giggles from the ghosts.

“Richard, you are talking to four dead people. You do know that, right?”

The ghosts were all quiet for a while. It was Richard, the living, who broke the moonlit silence.

“I guess stealing from Make-a-Wish shouldn’t come as such a surprise, given that before that lame attempt he made to change his identity; he was a

shamed Congressman who was convicted of embezzling and even cheating on his time cards for the sheriff's office and a major university. But then again, what can you expect from a guy who doesn't see anything wrong with the phrase 'White Nationalist', defends Nazis at every opportunity, and compared the Koran to 'Mein Kempf'. Which doesn't even make sense, by the way, because if you praise Nazis, but think that you can insult Muslims by—

“Wait, wait, wait!” said Tom, interrupting Richard's rant. “Wasn't that Steve King? The guy from Iowa, Congressman Steve King, isn't he the guy who said that?”

“Yeah. And he caught all the shit for it that he deserved, and he finally got unelected, thank God, and then tried to reinvent himself as a writer. By changing his name.”

“And nobody knew?”

“Sure, people knew. Just nobody cared. He was such a bad writer, nobody gave a crap what Steve King turned himself into. I guess that's why you didn't hear about it.”

All the ghosts chuckled. It was Wilbur who spoke next:

“So you are telling us that Gus Pillsbury is really Steve King?”

Richard chuckled and nodded.

“As they say in Iowa, 'Yepper!' ”

The crickets chirped. The whip-poor-wills wept. The stars above, discernible through the cracks in the treehouse ceiling, twinkled on the dead and the living. Richard took a long swig of the moonshine, then handed it to the group as they all passed it around and drank. Finally, Wilbur spoke.

“It would appear that the only one left to tell his life story is Calvin.”

Everyone looked at Calvin. He smiled awkwardly and shrugged.

“Okay. But I'm warning you, it's kind of. ...oh, what's that word you're constantly using, Richard? *Anticlimactic*, that's it! Compared to the lives you guys have led. Um, let's see... as you all know, when I was eighteen years and two months old, I married Helen Strathern on her eighteenth birthday, it was kind of my birthday present to her. And before we knew it, we had three kids. Joe, who became a dentist. Sandy, who became a social worker. And Roger, who went into the Air Force. Commissioned officer. Helen and I were so darn proud of those kids, because neither one of us went to college, neither of our parents went to college, in fact those kids were the first from either of our families to go to college. And we were . . . well . . . we were just *happy*. Really happy. Oh, and you also know that I took over my dad's business, 'Calvin's Caterpillars Heavy Equipment Rental.' I was named after him, of course. But you knew that. And I made a pretty good success of it. The business grew to three times the size it was when I took it over. And then Helen died a little before her time at sixty-three, poor thing, because of her weight. And I died the next day. And that's pretty much my story.”

Nobody said anything for a long time. It was as though everybody was waiting for more.

“Good story, Calvin.”

“Yeah. Very nice.”

“I envy you.”

“But when you died right after she died,” asked Butch, “You weren't really sick or anything, right? That is, nobody saw it coming? Calvin, you dog you, are you saying that you died of a broken heart?”

“That's exactly what I'm saying, Butch. When I got back from the funeral home, after I saw her lying there, and I had picked out the coffin and everything, I just spent that whole day thinking about how I didn't want to wake up one more day without her. I kept thinking back on the life we'd had

together and how dismal it would be without her by my side. And yes, I think I just willed myself into not breathing anymore, or something like that maybe. I don't remember thinking consciously about my own death, or suicide, or anything like that. I was just so crushed because my dear Helen was gone. I was . . .broken hearted."

"And fat." said Tom.

Butch punched Tom in the arm. "Asshole!"

"I'm just saying, his heart wasn't in the best shape," muttered Tom, "He'd had problems with his ticker, everyone in town knew that."

"Hey wait," said Wilbur. "Wasn't your wife famous for something?"

"Yeah, she was, wasn't she?" said Butch. "I remember Danny and I saw her on the news, and I said, 'Hey man, that's my buddy Calvin's wife!' and it was something really nice."

"Yes," said Calvin, smiling humbly. "Helen was on the news a bunch of times because of her blankets."

"That's right!" said Richard. "Now I remember. She ran some charity, and her charity's motto was 'Blanketing the World with Love', and then they had this other Christmas special thing, 'Making the World Warm, One Soul at a Time'. Hey Calvin, you sure married some kind of good woman."

Calvin nodded proudly.

"And she set some kind of record," Richard said, "I read about it just recently."

"57,964." said Calvin.

"Pardon?" asked Wilbur.

"That's how many blankets she made. It was a record. Nobody in the whole world ever made that many blankets for charity. Probably not that many blankets period. The kicker was--God I love that woman--she made a blanket every single day of her life, since the day she turned eleven, when her mom got

her into it, you know, for a charity thing. Even when she was sick, she made them. Even near the end, she kept on making them. And of course, the number is so high because a lot of days she made lots more than one. And then there were the big marathons she created. It was just her thing. It started out a project for kids, then she added old people, and of course pets. She figured if she could just make one other soul warm that day, she would have done a good thing.”

“But Calvin, what about--” asked Tom, “That is to say, I'm fascinated. What you just told us about your life--I mean where's the horrible crap that happens? The tragedies, the disasters, the family drama?”

“Well, there were a few. Our oldest, he ran away and stayed away for half a year. Worst six months of our lives. We finally found him. He was staying up at Big Bear, that resort in California, with his cousin. And then Helen was in that car accident. She was immobilized for two months. And I had that health scare, but that turned out to be fine. No, Tom, there wasn't any of that stuff. Drama, tragedy. I loved Helen. And Helen loved me. And we were, well, we were just *happy*.”

Richard sat up from his reclining position, suddenly energized.

“Calvin, I don't think there's any such thing as ‘just happy.’ I think anybody who manages to have a life where at the end of it, they had been mostly happy through it all, deserves the goddamn Nobel Peace Prize. That's what I think. I think you had an amazing life, Calvin.”

The others nodded in affirmation. There was a moment where everybody awkwardly patted Calvin on the back, shoulder, arms. Tough but tender. Richard screwed up his face, questioningly.

“The thing that I don't get, Calvin, is why don't you get to be with her now? Surely, if there's any justice in the universe, and you loved her so much,

and she was already dead when you died, then why aren't you with her now? What are you doing hanging out with a bunch of hairballs like us?"

"Well, it's not as grim as it sounds, Richard. As a matter of fact, it turns out, when you die--"

Suddenly Calvin's voice was silenced by the warnings of the three others, and Calvin stopped himself, quietly acknowledging their caveats.

Richard just rolled his eyes. He was getting used to this by now.

"Well guys, I'll tell you one thing. I may have stopped going to church. And I may not believe all the things that conventional religion espouses. But I do believe in a Higher Power, and in the majesty and mystery of the universe, call it the God of Einstein. And I have to say, frankly, I am stymied. I am scared. You know, I thought that coming to this treehouse would be the ideal place to die. After all, it all started here. In a good way. And I've had this really lucky, successful, blessed life. And I thought, 'Hey, why don't I lie down and die here under the stars?' And then you nimrods roll in!"

Richard took a long swig of moonshine; the Ball jar was empty, but he ranted on:

"And no offense, guys, but look at you! Tom, you got your brains pouring out of your head. Wilbur, you look like you are a broken doll that a child glued back together again. Butch, you're emaciated, and a long way from your football glory days. And Calvin, Calvin, I mean, well. . ."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm still fat. That's what you're thinking, right, like if heaven is so great, why aren't fat people thin?"

"I didn't mean it like that, Calvin," stammered Richard, leaning back and closing his eyes, suddenly more exhausted than he had ever been in his entire long life. In truth it seemed that his life was, indeed, flashing before his eyes: the sacred and the profane, the agony and the ecstasy, the beautiful moments and the terror filled hours, the brushes with immortality and

waltzing with the Reaper. Richard struggled to open his eyes, to continue the conversation with the ghosts: "It's just . . .well, me, Richard Bachman, I have cancer, and I can't buy or write my way out of it and well, will *I* look like this? I mean, when I'm, you know--And will the pain be this bad forever?"

"No, it won't," said Calvin." We can promise you that."

Wilbur leaned forward, a wry smile on his face.

"You're all about the stories and the great books, Richard. Think of us like Marley's ghost. Wearing the chains we forged in life. We came to you like this, *we come to the living like this*, as sort of a heads up."

"A last warning before they dig their own graves. So to speak." This from Butch.

"We change with the universe kiddo," added Tom. "The universe, and the entities in it, *see us the way we want to be seen.*"

"*There but for the Grace of God,*" added Calvin.

Richard Bachman nodded slowly, then cocked his head quizzically.

"Wait a minute, wait just a minute. What was all that stuff before, about you can't explain things, and you can't say anything, and you can't reveal stuff. But now, suddenly you can--Oh. wait. I think I get it. Guys, am I . . .?"

Immediately, Richard realizes that his perspective has changed. He seems to be hovering above the group, watching them, and watching himself.

And then, in a heartbeat, everything changes back. Again he is sitting in the tree house, looking at his friends, but they are changing before his eyes:

Tom's wound to the head is shrinking, healing up and suddenly invisible. Tom has once again become the handsome young Kennedy-esque politician that he was before the tragedy.

Butch's gaunt physique begins filling out, reverting back to the body of his youth, the body of a professional quarterback.

Wilbur's limbs akimbo straighten themselves out, and now he looks to be the portrait of health, his body looking like the competitive swimmer that he'd been all through middle school.

And Calvin--

--I'm dead, aren't I?" Richard Bachman asks. He is not looking at his friends, but up at the night sky through the slit in the treehouse, as though by gazing into the heavens, he will surely receive some answer from the stars themselves. "Guys, wow guys, did I just die?"

They all chuckle. Wilbur puts his hand on Richard's shoulder.

"Don't think of this as dying. Just think of it as not having a curfew anymore."

Suddenly Calvin stands up and beckons his buddies.

"Let's get out of here. Let's all go down to the creek and moon the boats passing by."

They jump up instantly, young and agile, and all smiles. As they scramble down through the trap door, they look back at the baffled but beaming soul who is rising to his translucent feet, so very slowly in that dark treehouse.

The ever impatient Calvin bellows at him.

"Hurry, Richard, or you'll ruin everything! By the time we get there, we won't be dead anymore."

And with that, the Fearsome Five clamber down the steps, and disappear into the woods.

It was a forest ranger who found the abandoned car and the note under the windshield. The car's owner had been reported missing three days earlier. The skittish ranger, the newly minted Officer Beryl Evans—a charming little waife of a thing who was stumbling through her first week on the job—read the note as she clutched it with trembling hands. She did not know it at the time, but these would be the last words ever written by Richard Bachman:

The most important things are the hardest things to say. They are things you get ashamed of, because words make them smaller. When they were in your head they were limitless; but when they come out they seem to be no bigger than normal things. But that's not all. The most important things lie too close to wherever your secret heart is buried; they are clues that could guide your enemies to a prize they would love to steal. It's hard and painful for you to talk about these things ... and when you try, people just look at you strangely. They haven't understood what you've said at all, or why you almost cried while you were saying it. That's the worst, I think. When the secret stays locked within, not for want of a teller, but for want of an understanding ear .

There was more, but the first page of the note had blown away, and she would not find it until much later. She gazed up above, high into the leafy branches, at the old treehouse. Everybody in town knew about the treehouse. She sighed, still trembling. She knew what she must do.

CHAPTER NINE:
THERE ARE NO ACCIDENTS

It was a dark and stormy night. So epic were the lightning bolts slicing through the black sky that you might think it was all Hollywood special effects. It was a soggy, CGI thunderfest. And it was during this storm that Reggie met the woman he was going to marry. At least, that is what he thought when he first saw her face, so beautiful was she of visage, so pure of spirit, so noble of soul.

And then, there was Reggie. Geeky, goofy. And to say that he was awkward with women does not even begin to describe it.

A horrific event caused them to meet.

Reggie was driving. It was a terrible night to be out; the city was suffering from a Superstorm, but Reggie had to pick up a big, bizarre machine that an eccentric friend of his had created. It was supposed to turn feces into fuel. (Of course, that alone was hardly a new idea, but inventors and

entrepreneurs who made any headway on the technology had a way of going under, or, well, *going under*. Financially or otherwise, and always right as a breakthrough was imminent. Too much of a threat to the traditional fuel tycoons.) The machine, looking like R2D2 on steroids, rattled around in the back seat, even though it was belted in.

Then, as Reggie was humming along with some classic rock that was playing on his floating pod player, the car in front of him screeched to a stop after hitting a dog, then sped off. Several pedestrians cried out in horror at the sight of the suffering creature, and a couple walking on the sidewalk next to Reggie's car screamed bloodcurdling banshee wails. Reggie was out of his car in a heartbeat, but she (the angel, his future wife!) had beaten him to the scene, running from the sidewalk into the street. She was leaning over the dog, her capacious raincoat draped over her and part of the dog, protecting it from the pelting rain.

"Can I help? What can I do?" asked Reggie in a panic.

The dog was staring up at him, *at him specifically*, as though it sensed that Reggie and this beautiful angel were the only two humans in a sea of gathering people who would do anything to stop the agony. Reggie knew that animals had no death dates over their heads, and that would tell him nothing. The angel looked up at Reggie.

"You have a car?"

"Yes."

"We need to get him into your car."

A lesser human might have paused to think about how the car upholstery would become bloodsoaked if the dog were lifted into the back seat, but Reggie didn't care. All he could see was the look on this dog's face. There was nobody else to help. Nobody but Reggie and this angel, who had been walking on the sidewalk, and did not have a car to get the dog to safety and a vet. Reggie

kneeled beside her. He had not seen her face fully yet, because her rain slicker had a large hood that covered her, like one of those nuns of old with the giant face-covering wimples. All he could see was her perfect skin, the color of mocha cappuccino, and the black curls that escape from the hood, refusing to be contained.

So Reggie focused on the dog. The dog seemed to be screaming at him for help, to make the pain go away, even though he was nearly silent and barely whimpering.

“Yes, of course,” sputtered Reggie to the girl. “Let me lift him.”

“Not yet. I have to wrap him, to keep him from bleeding out.”

Reggie was sure that the dog would die within minutes; the accident had gashed his midsection and part of his intestines were literally hanging out. It was a red and pink nightmare mess of innards. But the girl calmly ripped at the bottom of her rain cape and wrapped the dog. She seemed to have extraordinary knowledge of what she was doing.

“He’s ready. Now we lift him. Together. Open the car door first.”

Reggie obeyed, pushing the machine to one side, and together they hoisted the dog into the back seat. She leapt into the passenger seat, and you would have thought they were robbing a bank.

“Drive. Just drive. I’ll direct you.”

“You know an all night vet, then?” Reggie asked.

“Are you kidding? You know what a vet would have to do, right?”

Then Reggie realized. Vets were technically not allowed to treat animals who were admitted in “near-death status.” Waste of resources. Mass production of livestock for food had led to such horrific treatment of creatures in modern farm factories that no vet could get a license without promising to spend every other year tending to the dying, but otherwise sellable-for-meat-product animals. And when a vet was not working on these

hellish farms, that vet could engage in private practice, but was bound by law to euthanize all animals deemed high-risk for full recovery. Too many resources used. The world was a brutal, horrific, warrific place, and there were no excess piles of supplies--painkillers, antibiotics, bandages, medicines--just sitting around to be used on dying dogs and decrepit cats.

“So the plan is we take him to my place,” she announced, and she leaned around to look at the dog in the back seat. He still looked to be in agony, but he was not bleeding out any more.

A labyrinthine drive, maybe ten minutes, through the pelting rain punctuated by lightning, and they were there, at her little house. Together they quickly carried the dog in; together they placed him on a cold metal table, just like the kind that a veterinarian would have. And then Reggie stood back silently as she grabbed supplies from plastic bin drawers. Reggie glanced around and surmised that she was either a veterinarian, or at least had all of a vet’s necessary skills. A vet’s assistant, perhaps. Although she had done nothing yet, and the dog was lying on this cold metal table, it looked just a bit less anxious. It seemed to sense that it was in caring hands. Reggie tried not to be too crushed about the fact that those caring hands wore an engagement ring. A big, flashy diamond.

“I don’t want to turn on too many lights,” she explained as she went to work, “Because my neighbors are busybodies, and I don’t want them calling anybody they shouldn’t call. . .”

The entire scene was surreal to Reggie. Not fifteen minutes ago, he had been driving through the rain, enjoying the irony of the fact that his Pod player had, quite of its own AI initiative, with no prompting from Reggie, decided to play a medley of rain music: “Have You Ever Seen the Rain”, “Riders on the Storm”, “Fire and Rain”, “Purple Rain”, that kind of thing. And now, here he was in this dark and strange place, trying to save the life of his poor dog.

Finally, here in the dim light created by a single hanging bulb, he could really see her sweet face for the first time--which he would always remember as the most beautiful face he had ever seen--and the aura of grace which seemed to surround her entire form. And that was when the crazy idea, that mad notion that has possessed certain lovers since the beginning of time, occurred to him: this was the woman he was going to marry.

She had given the dog some kind of injection, and it lay there, still and peaceful. She took a moment to gather her thoughts, then she took a deep breath, and removed her drenched rain poncho.

That was when Reggie saw the numbers dancing over her head. (It was peculiar, he would ponder in the crystalline hindsight of the future: he had not even wondered what her numbers might be until he actually saw them, such was the power of love at first sight. And so smitten had he been by this love at first sight, it never would have occurred to him that the odds could be so completely against him, against this dream of romance.)

But there the numbers were.

She was to die in exactly one month.

The rest of this short and strange encounter grew even stranger--at least it did for Reggie, who was now husbanding this terrible truth. Perhaps worst of all, the deaths of the last few people whose demise had become a part of Reggie's world because of "the gift", had proven one thing to him, with utter certainty: there was no cheating death. The Reaper would have his Waltz, if his name was on your dance card.

What to do, what to do? His brain could not really focus, because she was barking orders, in between muttering soothing words to the dog, who could not hear her utterances because the injection had knocked him out, but perhaps she imagined that the dog's subconscious was aware. . .

Twenty minutes later, her work was complete, and the dog was sewn up. She produced a bottle of wine and a couple of old preserve jars from somewhere, and they sat down on the sofa. She squinted her eyes at Reggie, sizing him up.

“This is a toast to the dog, not the beginning of some kind of date, just so we're clear.”

Reggie nodded and swallowed hard. She was just a little bit scary. She seemed to know what she wanted with utter certainty at any given moment, and she let the universe know it. All of this was just fine with Reggie, who considered the whole alpha male business to be a ridiculous thing.

But neither the wine, nor her charms, nor their constant checking on the dog (who, it appeared, would pull through), could stop his mind from obsessing on the horrible numbers dancing above her head. His mind was racing. What the hell was he supposed to do? Try to prevent her death, in the face of all evidence to the contrary? Be by her side every moment from now until then, so that she did not have to die alone and afraid? Of course, of course. But how? She had just uttered a clear pronouncement about his lack of a chance with her, and the diamond ring on the fourth finger of her left hand certainly made her story clear enough. Should he follow her into death, and test the professor's strange and wonderful theories about the Afterlife, and Reincarnation? Should he--

“You were really great out there tonight--Reggie? Is that what you said your name was? And letting that poor dog into your car, that was really kind.”

Her dulcet tones drew his mind back to the here and now. Reggie shrugged sheepishly.

“Of course, how could I not? These new rules, about the veterinarians and all, they are draconian.”

“That’s not the word I had in mind.”

“It seems like this is a thing you do often. You’re equipped.”

“It’s an ongoing struggle, but yes. And oh, I’m sure I don’t have to say this, but you can’t let anybody know about this. You must know that this whole setup is quite illegal.”

“Oh course. I am mute. I remember nothing.”

They chuckled, sipped their wine.

“Oh dear,” she said, “I didn’t even introduce myself. I’m Sera. Sera Hawthorne.”

“That’s a pretty name.” A master of pithy conversation, Reggie was not.

“Well, my full name is Seraphim, after the angels, but that’s a little pretentious for me. That is, if you knew me.”

“Well. ‘Sera’ is nice. Do your parents call you ‘Seraphim’? ‘Seraphim, don’t be late for Sunday dinner.’ ‘Seraphim, please don’t text at the table.’ Ha ha.”

“Actually, my parents died when I was twelve, and I’m an only child. So I don’t really have any close family.”

“Oh. Sorry,” said Reggie. “I can relate. My parents also died a few years ago.”

“Are you an only child too?”

Reggie studied her, pondered the notion of telling her his strange tale, but then thought better of it.

“Yes. Yes I am.”

He wanted desperately to change the mood.

“Look, I enjoyed this--well, of course, enjoyed isn't the right word. But it made me feel good to make a difference, so, I was thinking . . . maybe I could help you again some time?”

She stopped mid sip and stared at him strangely over her glass of wine.

“Don't take this wrong, but that sure as hell sounded like what had to be the worst pick-up line in the world.”

Reggie was suddenly flustered and flushed for a split second, almost spitting out his wine.

“It's not. It wasn't. I'm sorry. Look, I'd better be going,” Reggie stammered, standing up awkwardly and gathering his things. Suddenly, he had to be away from those numbers dancing over her head.

And then, typical of a female, she kissed him warmly on the cheek, before tossing him out into the night.

As he drove away from her house, Reggie knew exactly where he was headed. The atmosphere at the encampment was strangely convivial, as though the swarm of homeless were there by choice, at some grand party, rather than out of sheer desperation. They were having a party; beer and booze flowed freely.

Reggie clambered his way to the professor's tent, who was embarrassingly happy to see him. They shared a beer as Reggie picked his mentor's brain:

“So, Professor. The sixty-four thousand dollar question. Do I tell her? Do I explain to her about the gift, and show her all the proof, and tell her the date of her death? Because if I don't, what chance do we have--”

“NO! Kid, if you never, ever listened to anything else I have ever told you, at least listen to this: do not tell her. The answer is no, don’t tell her. That’s the surest way to scare her off.”

“But if I *did* tell her, she and I could--”

“Hey, buddy. There is no ‘she and I’, savvy? She’s got a fiancé.”

“But Professor, I have information that could help her. I am not gonna just stand by and--”

“No one is telling you to just stand by. Or stand down. But people have a way of shooting the messenger.”

“It’s not shooting. I hate it when people do that. It’s from ‘Plutarch’s Lives’, and it was Tigranes, and he decapitated the messenger. They didn’t even have guns back then.”

The professor just glowered at Reggie for a time.

“Kid. You do realize that you have no chance with this girl?”

“How do you know?”

“Hey, I read the society pages. Seraphim Hawthorne? Jeez. This girl is high profile. Sort of. Don’t you know? She’s engaged to Buzz McClain, that rugby player who was so famous, then got kicked off the team after that big scandal, and now he just spends his dad’s money. His dad is the richest real estate tycoon in the city. Real asshole, from what I hear.”

“So what am I supposed to do, Professor? About Sera? About the dates.”

“Start out by not telling her. Reggie, heed my warning. You will only scare her away. Kid, you have to remember, this gift only serves to make you that much weirder. I’m sorry, but that’s the truth. Instead, you just bide your time, and figure out how to get close to her. I’ll help you. And we’ll, uh, well, we’ll figure it out. Dammit, you were given this gift for a reason! But first things first. Reggie, you have to promise me you won’t go near her for a week. Or two. You said yourself that her death is a month off. If you call her back

right now after she told you not to, she may cut you off completely. That creep trust fund boyfriend may even get a restraining order. And then you can't help her at all, savvy?"

"Yeah. Savvy."

"Reggie. . ."

"I promise. I swear."

The two of them fell into silence. The professor eyeballed Reggie, trying to read his thoughts.

"What kid, spill it. . ."

"Not her. It's not about her. It's the people at Angel's Acres. They're starting to, you know, ask me about their relatives. Their kids, grandkids."

"And?"

"Well, it's not good. Professor, you know what modern hospices are like. There are hundreds of people jammed into that building, which means there are maybe thousands of relatives in and out. And statistically, you know what that means."

The professor said nothing. Finally, he spoke softly, quoting someone, his eyes staring off into space:

"All say, how hard it is that we have to die -- a strange complaint to come from the mouths of people who have had to live."

"The Buddha?"

"Nope."

"The Dalai Lama?"

"No. The Mark Twain."

CHAPTER TEN:
SCHADENFREUDE

Regarding the residents of that bittersweet last outpost known as Angel Acres: To say that the deaths were beautiful might have been a bit pollyanna, but there was, nonetheless, a range of lovely qualities that these deaths all enjoyed, which simply would not have been possible without the strange, other-worldly interference of Reggie's gift. They were noble and practical. They were gorgeous and tranquil. They had panache; they had closure. They were bigger than life, and smaller were the terrors experienced by all, because of this last bit of control wielded by the dying. On these matters, all witnesses were in agreement.

All in all, the Grim Reaper seemed more like an invited guest than the Master of Ceremonies.

Sure as hell wish I could go that way.

But, back to Reggie's conversation with the professor. The next phase in the sharing of his gift. It had started the day before he met Sera:

Reggie was dreading what he surely knew would come next. It was inevitable. The day when those terminally ill folks, thinking often and long about those whom they would leave behind, wanted to know about the disposition of their families. What did Reggie see? What about their dear sons and daughters, what about their grandchildren? What about brothers and sisters, cousins that were close like siblings? Parents, even--the young dying souls would want to know details about the parental units who would outlive them. Would all of these beloved lead rich, full lives? Or was there something they needed to know? Some dire warning which Reggie could issue them, so that preparations could be made? What ominous digits were floating above their heads?

Reggie had many sleepless nights, thinking about it. Those sickly, mortal faces, looking into his eyes, asking, *"Will my son live to be an old man? Will he have a good, long life, as I have had?"* And *"What about my baby girl? Will she pass away peacefully in her bed, surrounded by children, and grandchildren, and great-grandchildren?"*

"Maybe you could just arrange to be here Sunday afternoon, and take a look at their numbers, and let me know . . ."

"You need to understand, my daughter Elizabeth is so special. If I could just have that knowledge . . ."

"It's my grandkids, you see. Knowing they are going to be OK, that would give me such comfort, in my final hours . . ."

And on and on it went, in this fashion, as you might imagine. Could you resist the urge to badger Reggie, if it was you?

So here is how it all fell out. Reggie agreed. He would monitor visiting family members, and scan their numbers. If what he saw was bad, should he tell them? (And there was, believe me, a lot of back and forth bickering over what constituted “bad” -- death in the next six months? Six years? One decade? And of course that depended on the age of the loved one on the Grim Reaper’s dance card.

It had been decided at the very beginning, when Reggie first met Harry, and Harry introduced him to the others, that they needed to find some way of documenting Reggie’s gift. His original makeshift plan, using his prediction of the grisly demise of Brill Waxhead, buttressed by the death of the fortune teller and her bouncer boyfriend, may have worked for these already terminal hospice patients, but it needed refining. Bolstering. More proof.

And so it was decided: Every person in the hospice who elected to learn their precise date of death -- and I cannot stress enough the fact that they all knew their death was imminent anyhow, so knowing the exact date was not nearly as traumatic as you might first suppose -- would agree to have Reggie document the information in what ended up being a rather elaborate spreadsheet. We are talking Reggie, after all.

THE FIVE

For the rest of his days, Reggie wondered (as you may find yourself wondering) why the first five visiting relatives that Reggie had to give the bad news to were such despicable souls. They were, each of the five, the kind of

people who, when you read about their death in the paper, you try to muster some sympathy for them, but you just can't. You just can't do it. In a dark moment of Schadenfreude, you grin, you titter, and your sense of cosmic justice is reaffirmed.

When looking back on the hatefulness of the first five, those folks “in the know” (again, I am not allowed to get into who that might be or why they might be in the know), came up with three theories as to why the whole ordeal of informing strangers that they were about to die was as painless as it was for Reggie. He might as well have been one of those process servers, ambushing you from behind a ficus plant in an office waiting room, to tell you that money was owed and we'll see you in court, for all it phased Reggie. Three theories emerged as to why the first five doomed relatives of hospice residents were so very--well, put it this way, you just didn't care that they were going to die, and die young.

The first was the Theory of Human Nature. It is natural, folks opined, for the young and healthy and vital and happy to shun the sick and the dying. Hospice workers gnash about it endlessly. The poor little terminal soul in room so-and-so, that nobody ever visits, except for that awkward twenty minute drive-by on Christmas Eve or Thanksgiving afternoon. Sad. Nobody means to be cold and unfeeling. But what do you say to the dying? Short of clichés and Bible thumping, seriously, what do you say? Easier to pretend the situation doesn't exist. That the dying just don't exist. Good practice for later. So who *does* show up, when the normal people don't? The creeps, the ghouls, the grifters, the vultures. Odious opportunists, waiting to profit off the dead, much as the rag pickers profited from the sad demise of an unrepentant Scrooge.

The second was the Theory of the Coin Toss. Was it odd that the first five relatives of hospice residents that Reggie had to speak with (about their imminent Reaper's Waltz) were horrible human beings, each in their own way? A statistician would tell you that it was just an odd but possible statistical outcome. Much like a coin toss. It seems unusual, yes, that a coin could come up heads five times in a row, all things being equal, in a series of coin tosses. But not impossible. To be precise, the odds are one chance in thirty-two of this happening. Pit Probabilities against Desired Outcomes, run the math, and yes, there is a 1 in 32 chance that the next five people you meet in the Dollar Tree, or on the bus, or during the Easter Parade, will be loathsome, abhorrent, repugnant.

The third explanation. The Sweetest One. Although the one most likely to be rejected by the majority of realists and every cynic. The third explanation was: God, the gods, spirit guides, angels, the universe, whatever, you get my drift. God/the Universe, always wise and sometimes kind, had arranged five spiteful souls for Reggie to encounter, once he moved beyond the "easy" category of those who were patients in the hospice and already knew they were gonna kick the bucket. And why was that Higher Intelligence from the Great Beyond being so considerate? All in order to make it easier for the poor, ridiculous, perceptive, decent, suffering, nervous, genius, miraculous Reggie to inform people that there were expiration dates, much like numbers stamped on a milk carton, dancing over their doomed pates.

CHAPTER ELEVEN:
A.J. THE CORRUPT COP

Unless he had pulled you over in his squad car, or was frisking you on the street, he always absolutely insisted, as he shook your hand vigorously or patted you on the back, that you refer to him as “A.J.” He liked this because he thought it made him sound like everybody’s pal, a regular guy.

But he was not. A.J. was the biggest son-of-a-bitch prick bastard cruel creep in the precinct. You couldn't swing a dead cat (a thing that A.J. had actually done, by the way), without finding some sorry soul that A.J. had belittled, threatened, stalked, abused, bullied, maimed, or otherwise terrorized. A.J. was either openly or secretly hated and feared by just about everybody who knew him.

It is also worth noting that A.J. was always on the take. The precinct was rife with graft and corruption, as were more hierarchies in the city than you want to know about, and A.J. always found a way to be a part of it. All of it. If a gang was dealing drugs and guns, A.J. knew about it, and got his share, in exchange for letting the gang continue their evil business. The local pawn

shop operator got a shake down from A.J. periodically, and that was how A.J. got his Christmas shopping done. If there was a big, illegal poker game going on, A.J. got his share of the pot. If there was a brothel in operation, A.J. made sure he not only got a chubby wad of cash handed to him every Saturday night, but he also had his chubby handled. And dammittohell, it better be handled effing well, or somebody was going to get slapped around. Hell, when the senior citizens played Bingo, A.J. got a cut. And if some little mice, infesting a local sandwich shack to escape the winter snows, were planning the heist of a wedge of cheese, you can bet that A.J. would be there, wanting a big sliver. And then, he would stomp the living guts out of one of the mice, as a lesson to the others.

Make no mistake, though, it wasn't just that A.J. was corrupt. He was dangerous, too. And evil. Once, a bunch of his fellow cops watched a large, gloriously blue butterfly--a sight virtually never seen in this grey and brooding city--land on the hood of an official vehicle. A.J. brought his fist down on the poor thing and smashed it into a stain of azure. Why? Because he thought that perhaps this was the creature responsible for creating a few infinitesimal poo stains on his freshly scrubbed squad car. A former partner, (who had subsequently begged for a transfer), swore he saw A.J. kick a puppy into a bathroom wall during a drug bust. It had dragged itself away, as though its spine was damaged, and when the new rookie partner tried to pick it up and help it, A.J. grabbed him by the shirt and threatened to come over and kick the living crap out of the rookie's dog, if he reported the incident. The thought of that poor agonized puppy would haunt the rookie cop forever. And although nobody could trace any of the stories back to their source, the grisly accounts of what A.J. had done to women who'd had some bad luck--gang groupies, hookers, addicts--all those stories had achieved the status of urban legend,

and cops tended to keep their distance. Nobody ever invited A.J. along to the precinct's favorite watering hole, or to barbecues or parties. And yet, creepily enough, A.J. always managed to show up, a big smile on his face and a frothy beer in his hand, even as he got out of his car.

It was just such a man, then, that found himself face to face with Reggie in the hall outside a dying relative's room. (In point of fact, the only reason that A.J. was visiting the terminal relative, a distant great aunt, is that A.J. had promised his mom before she died, and not even A.J. would fuck around with promises made to a mother on her deathbed.) That relative had, of course, begged the morbid favor of Reggie, and Reggie had reluctantly agreed. Reggie stood in front of the police officer, nervous, but determined.

"Here's the thing, officer. I know this is going to sound 'non compos mentis', but I can prove the veracity of everything that I am about to say to you. I have been given a grim and unique gift, but I feel that you can use it to your advantage, although the manner in which you might do that will at first seem counterintuitive, and not nearly compensation enough for the bad news that I am about to impart."

A.J. squinted at him, trying to understand the big words. Reggie took a deep breath and plowed on.

"Sir, I can see the day of your death. It shines like a Broadway playbill above your head, and I am sorry to tell you that your death will take place ten days from now. On the seventeenth of this month."

A.J. immediately grabbed a startled Reggie and slammed him against the wall, bellowing as he choked Reggie by his plaid shirt collar.

"Who sent you? The Marino Family? The O'Leary Brothers? Juan Capistrano?" (Every time he'd bark a name, he slammed Reggie against the wall.) "The Chins? The Huangs? The Kensington klan? Von Dietrich and his

skanky sister? The Menendez mom and her creepy kids? That painter guy, Pierre Boulanger or however the frogs pronounce it, who paints that faggotty impressionist crap for the tourists?”

“Nobody sent me,” Reggie kept trying to interject, but A.J. would have none of it.

“Mrs. O'Shaughnessy? Fiona--did she put you up to this? Those dirtbag priests at St. Luke's? That fuckin' lotto winner from last month? That rookie from the whorehouse raid? That creep from the sandwich shop I cited for having expired condiments?”

“No, no officer, and if you will just give me five minutes, I can prove it.”

“Those lying nuns who run the foodbank? That little kid who runs numbers for Benny the Bagel? That lady with the stick up her ass who runs the 11/9 memorial gift shop down the street? That douchebag street vendor and his stupid monkey? So I slapped the monkey around a little, have you met that fuckin' monkey? He's rude and he's ugly.”

A.J.'s body slamming of poor Reggie had snagged the attention of a security guard monitoring a bank of CCTV screens two floors below. (None of the terminally ill were guarded as such, but hiring the guard had been a kind gesture on the part of the hospice to deal with both dementia patients, and those who became hysterical or ill when visiting a loved one during their very last minutes.) Within seconds, the guard had lunged up the stairs and was pulling the wailing and pummeling A.J. off of Reggie.

“Officer, you're killing him!”

“Nah, just getting' him to 'fess up who put him up to this.”

“Officer, I can't allow you--”

“---What the f--*YOU* can't allow *ME*? I am an officer, see this badge, whereas you are just a fuckin' rent-a-cop that I could throw into the deepest pit of a jail on Riker's for interfering with the duty of a police officer !”

And on it went like this, back and forth, until A.J. realized that he was not going to get the information he wanted this way. What the hell, he thought, and with the help of the hospice security officer, he went down the hall to a small room where Reggie had everything set up.

As A.J. watched, the blood drained from his face. He was starting to believe Reggie. The proof was compelling. It was all there--Reggie predicting Brill Waxhead's death, the gypsy's death, the exact date of the death of various patients at Angel's Acres Hospice. Reggie knew how to prove his point, the cop had to give him that much. A.J. raged and screamed crazy things, inarticulate things. His fear and confusion made him violent again, and he started grabbing things and smashing them against the wall: a computer monitor, a vase of flowers, a ceramic angel, a snowglobe. By then, the real cops had come, and they rolled their eyes and exchanged fearful comments when they realized who they were going to be dealing with.

They knew what to say, and they talked A.J. down from his rage just enough to get him out of there. They told him to forget about his shift and go home. They assumed his bellowing about his imminent death was just so much A.J. rambling horseshit.

You see, here is what you need to know about A.J. He was not religious, he never prayed, he did not believe in God, nor did he put any credence in the existence of angels or ghosts. He did not think there was any kind of an afterlife or reincarnation, nor did he believe in the existence of the multiverse, even though the clear existence of it had been proven--to the satisfaction of the scientific community, at least. But A.J. would have none of it. He didn't even like hippies, and he would tell you that the hippies constituted the

beginning of the end of this great country, by God. If they didn't like it, they could go to liberal Europa. Or Canadia.

But there was one dark secret that A.J. had never shared with anybody. He even hated to admit the memory of it to himself: on more than one occasion, he had decided to shake down that crazy gypsy downtown, the one who would read your future with a deck of cards and a crystal ball, and who ended up with a bullet through her head, along with her crazy Roma partner. Oh, she had paid A.J. his graft. But she cursed him every time she did. And when she did, she would inform him of some horrible thing that would befall him--and it creped him out to no end that her predictions always did, in fact, befall him. A.J. would analyze it over and over again in his mind, and he always came to the conclusion that it was not something the gypsy could have caused or controlled. It just happened: two flat tires on the Verrazzano bridge, then a long distance call informing him that his niece, one of the few creatures he loved in this world, had died. A bucket of paint falling on him at work. Finding a cockroach in his cheesesteak sandwich. His mother falling down stairs at the old folks' home. The harsh fact of all this had forced him to concede that perhaps there were unseen forces in the universe . . . and perhaps some people could glimpse the future.

A.J. hurried home. He didn't even stop back by precinct headquarters.

A.J. had the worst night of his life. He drank and was sleepless, so he drank some more. He watched HSN and then Porn Hub; he bought some nasty stuff off of the internet from white supremacist sites and sex sites, along with some incredibly innocuous purchases from the Home Shopping Network. He masturbated to the pretty sales lady's rambling about sexy lingerie that she

was selling. He ate partly frozen burritos, as he was too drunk to manage the microwave, and when he fell asleep, he rolled onto the half-full plate.

In the morning he had himself a little hair of the dog, then went to the liquor store, since it looked like it would be one of those weeks when he would be keeping a soothing buzz going pretty much 24-7.

Then, for the next two days, he went out into the world and beat the crap out of everybody he had asked Reggie about the day before.

And then finally, on the third day after Reggie had given him the grim news, A.J. came up with a brilliant scheme, to save his own life. (Well, as brilliant as A.J. ever got.) He made a plan. On the date of his so-called death, he would go to work and spend the entire day, twenty-four hours straight, in the safest place he could think of: the precinct headquarters. What could possibly happen to a decent, brave cop like himself at precinct headquarters? He did not know why he hadn't thought of it before! Like all twenty-first century police departments, under the rule of The President Rex, they were fully militarized, hence fully protected. Nobody could walk in without going through a metal detector and full body scan. The windows were all bulletproof, state of the art polycarbonate. An imposing line of tanks sat in the parking lot as back-up to the traditional cruisers, animal control SUVs, and riot-ready gas wagons inspired by the genius of an earlier century, a more patriotic century (thought A.J. proudly, wistfully) . . . and a purer, more ruthless race. Nobody fucked with the precinct.

A.J. relaxed, and cracked open another beer.

CHAPTER TWELVE:
RHODA'S SECRET TREASURE

THE WOW EFFECT: "It's all about Motivation and Method! You see, when it comes to your GOAL, when you understand what is motivating you! The WHY of it, and--this is equally important--once you understand the HOW of it, or, to put it another way, what method you have mapped out to get there . . . THAT is the moment when these two powerful forces of Motivation and Method, that is to say the WHY and the HOW, collide in the space-time continuum, and you get the WOW. Got it? Say it with me, over and over again. WHY plus HOW equals WOW!"

This was at the heart of Rhoda Embers' philosophy. And though it may sound like a humongous pantload to you and I, pithyisms like this had made her a multi-millionairess. It had, in fact, garnered her enough money to have her grifting past buried, and buried deep, even in this invasive epoch of the world wide web, where it seems that nobody can keep a Secret.

Certainly Rhoda could not keep as her Secret the fact that both her former co-author and her former business partner were suing her, to the tune

of millions. They were supposed to share three ways the vast fortune that she had amassed from her bestselling book, “The Treasure”, which basically talked about how if you sent the right vibrations out into the universe, the universe would send you back a car or a beach house or a new life in Beverly Hills or a shopping spree on Rodeo Drive or the cash for a facelift. “The Treasure” was based on a really, really old book, which Rhoda wouldn’t tell you the name of, or she wouldn’t be able to keep selling her book, because you might just go to The Source. Actually, Rhoda hadn’t written just one best selling book. She had penned a whole slew of them: The Treasure, The Arcanum, The Wizard, The Rune, The Talisman, The Seeker, The Finder, The Giza Scheme, and The Gumball Machine Prize.

A few of the more astute students of her work noticed that these last titles appeared at about the same time that she had been spotted at haute places around the globe, visibly schnockered on festive drinks sporting little paper umbrellas and tiny plastic swords jammed full of candied fruit. Rhoda defended herself a little too vigorously, claiming that she did not have a drinking problem, and that those more recent titles were just meant to broaden her audience appeal.

She also had an offshoot line of books, derived from the main series: there was the children’s book, “You CAN keep The Secret”, a coloring book for grown-ups called “Rainbows to Riches”, a book for young people about facing life’s difficulties that was charmingly entitled “ ‘Tween a Rock and a Hard Place” --and of course, there was her recipe tract, “The Yeast You Can Do”, which was such a hit that she followed it with “The Yeast of My Brethren”. She even had a pop-up book ready for her eager public; its imminent release was on her mind even as she had taken a cab to Angels Acres for a visit with poor Aunt Bethany. (Her mother’s sister obviously just hadn’t believed hard enough in the right things, like visualizing that tumor as a stalker you take out

a restraining order on, you know what I mean?, pondered Rhoda, and it was just a shame that it would cost Aunty B. her life.)

The pop-up book was ~~stolen from~~ inspired by the old Monopoly game, and it came with a velvet bag of Ember Tokens. You flipped through the book and, without going into details about the rules, various rewards would “pop up”! You could get a car, a yacht, a spouse, a new wardrobe, jewels, a college degree, your own blockbuster tv show, botox, a new nose, a world cruise, or enlightenment. Rhoda’s “idea committee” argued pretty heatedly about how to portray that last one as a pop-up image, but Rhoda finally managed to corral them.

Rhoda Embers seemed to live a teflon life; such was the assessment of even her greatest detractors. When she and her husband, Ray J. Arthur, were arrested for the famous Indian sweat house deaths that had occurred at the climax of one of their supposedly empowering “Spiritual Samurai” seminars, Rhoda promptly divorced him. She swore under oath that she had warned him this awful tragedy might happen, but he would not listen. So while she wished him all the best, she felt she had no choice but to engage in a conscious uncoupling.

Although there were very hard feelings between them, they were clever enough to come together long enough to dissolve the union on television. They decided on New Dahomey, where both of them had previously seminared to massive crowds eager to believe the magical promise of free wealth from the Universe. The ceremony was to be performed by a shiccan (a shaman-wiccan, which was kind of a new thing that had evolved, since the old, traditional religions were being taxed to death), who oversaw with great flair the Dissolving of Bonded Souls broadcast live all over the world.

The ratings were even higher than Rhoda had dared hope they would be.

Only after the ratings were broadcast did she learn that the ratings were through the roof because during the ceremony, someone had leaked footage of her beating her husband with a magickal wiccan deer antler talisman during a big, ugly, genuine fight they had backstage just before the ceremony.

Specifically, it was the large chunk of druzey quartz at the crown of the talisman that hit Ray J. full on.

He became faint after the ceremony was over, and he was secretly rushed to the hospital, the dusting from the druzey still glowing mad mystical in the wound. For a while, the voodoo-prone doctors thought he was radioactive. They feared. They waited an hour to work on him, and many have claimed that he was never the same after this. The upside was that after the sweat house deaths trial was over, even though Ray J. had been found guilty of the negligent homicide of three people, he was committed to a mental hospital.

Meanwhile, his x-wife Rhoda Embers only became wealthier and wealthier and famouser and famouser.

NERD ALERT! For those of you who are old school: it is worth noting that in 2027 the “New and Improved Ultra-Abridged Oxford English Dictionary” officially designated “famouser” as a valid word. The whole OED “word of the year” thing was an etymological moment watched eagerly by linguists everywhere, especially ever since 2020, when the world became so crazy (Coronavirus, I’m lookin’ at you), and also suffered from so much social media logorrhea that the OED’ers could not come up with a *single* word of the year, but instead they had to select a *whole pantload* of new words. “*I’ve never witnessed a year in language like the one we’ve just had,*” said Oxford Dictionaries president Casper Grathwohl. “*The team at Oxford were identifying hundreds of significant new words and usages as the year unfolded, dozens of which would have*

been a slam dunk for word of the year at any other time. It's both unprecedented and a little ironic – in a year that left us speechless, 2020 has been filled with new words unlike any other.” Meanwhile, the New York Times gave us a dark pithyquip, its headline simply calling the 2020 Word “*Too Hard To Isolate*”. Hahaha.

The list of possibilities was long and fat. Among the nominees way back in 2020, besides obvious ones like “Covid” and “QAnon”, were “workation”, “unmute”, “TikTok”, “staycation”, “anthropause”, “Juneteenth”, “defund”, “allyship”, “superspreader”, “moonshot”, “bubbles”, “gigafire”, “BIPOC”, “infodemic”, “Blursday”, “Covidiot”, “Coronials”, “freedumb”, and “doomscrolling”. Ah, for the good old days, like 2015, when “Lumbersexual” actually made the short list. Oh, and also not to be forgotten, those selected 2020 phrases, everybody’s idiomatic darlings during the dark days: “Social Distancing”, “Essential Workers”, “Cancel Culture”, “Contact Tracing”, “Black Lives Matter”, “Mask Shaming”, “Flatten the Curve”, “Remote Learning”, “Shelter in Place”, “The ‘Rona”, “Dissent Collar”, and last but most certainly not least, “Toobin-Zoomin”.

But Back to Rhoda Embers.

All of this showering of success (and money) from the Universe, built on a burgeoning confidence-melded-with-hypostatized & metastasized consciousness, was the reason that Rhoda was so surprised when this puny squirt in a plaid shirt, this Reggie somebody, who obviously never worked out and was clearly still consuming dairy, had the nerve to come up to her, as she was emerging from her dear (wealthy) Aunt Bethany's room at the hospice.

And this nerd had the nerve to tell her that she was going to die in a week.

Of course, he did not say it so baldly, so quickly.

But as is the case with all people who spew bullshit for a living, she had developed quite a nose for it, and this young man was clearly a kid with an agenda. He was polite, and full of prefacing, but finally, after giving the well-rehearsed speech, he hit her with the bad news: within a week, she would be dead.

She was thrown for a loop when he first said the words:

“ . . .So, what I am trying to say, Ms. Embers, is that perhaps you might wish to put your affairs in order, because one week from today is the date of your death. And as I have said, I can offer you definitive proof.”

But Rhoda Embers did not freak out. She did not grab him or whip on him or scream, or any such thing. She simply smiled, and put her hand on his shoulder, and cooed, “Oh, darlin’, do you think that you are my first stalker?”

Reggie opened his mouth to reply to her, but before he could, she oozed, “ . . . and do you think that you are the first person to threaten to kill me?” And before Reggie could reply, she barrelled on. “--No, hush now, you’ve said your piece. I’m not done. Honey, I deal with pipsqueaks of your ilk all day long. I am not impressed, and I am not afraid.”

And then a very strange thing happened. Several buxom girls in tightly fitting clothes emerged, seemingly from nowhere (although the security cameras could tell you that they came through the large swinging doors), and they surrounded poor, defenseless Reggie. They overwhelmed him. Truth to tell, so nervous had Reggie been about giving his “death speech”, and so busy

was he pushing his glasses back up on his face and shuffling around awkwardly, that he did not notice Rhoda call down to the first floor on her very small black device where her company was giving a free demonstration to residents in the events room. (What Rhoda Embers planned to accomplish by selling her visioneering products to people who only had a short time to live, who can say, but it was a good bet that it had to do with making a pile of money from the terminally ill.)

Somehow--and the answer to this riddle surely had to do with the fact that Reggie was young and full of hormones--Reggie did indeed fall prey to the sensual wiles of these women who were Rhoda's assistants, her seminar facilitators. All he could later remember was being too polite to say "no" when they said that he should come downstairs with them, to listen for a while. There he engaged in a variety of spiritual exercises that seemed to involve a startling amount of touching to promote healing, and massaging and feeling and rubbing, and next thing Reggie knew, an hour had flown by. And Reggie had played along. You might say that he rose to the occasion.

He finally extricated himself from their feminine wiles, declining to purchase any of Rhoda Embers' products, but he did fantasize about the encounter later that night.

What he could not know though, was that during that time in the hospice, Rhoda Embers had, by networking with the dying patients, availed herself of the "proof" Reggie claimed to have--incontrovertible evidence that she would, in fact, die in a week. It was based, of course, on his well documented ability to predict the exact date of death of so many who had come before her.

There was no question, the supernally confident Rhoda Embers was shaken. For while she would never admit it to another living soul, she secretly

knew that she was something of a fraud, and this uncomfortable truth had been highlighted when it had been her professional pleasure to meet people in the motivational and spiritual world who were, indeed, gifted. She had met old souls whom she knew had other-worldly powers . . . true powers to see the future, to astrally project, to read minds. It galled her to no end that she had not been given any of these real gifts, but she could respect it when she saw it. Like Reggie, they had astonishingly and effectively proved their abilities to her over and over again.

In a word, Rhoda Embers *believed*. It seemed as though this Reggie person had a true glimpse of the future, and her demise was imminent. She hadn't studied the proofs with Reggie, but she had been shown them by others at Angel's Acres. For a chunk of time, her confidence plunged.

But Rhoda Embers was not to be beaten. She could outthink them! After all, she hadn't gotten this rich and famous without having some serious game. She hadn't risen from nothing, from the abject outback shack-with-no-running-water childhood to Hooters Girl to international motivational star, without a truckload of gumption, moxie, and Balor-sized balls.

She could beat this, she just knew she could. She sat down that afternoon in her penthouse apartment, sipped on some Balm of Gilead tea, and formulated a plan. The solution, of course, was right in front of her. She knew exactly where she was going to be on the supposed date of her death.

She was to be a keynote speaker at the biggest wealth and wellness seminar ever put together by the industry. And as much as Rhoda Embers hated the thought of canceling on the opportunity, this was clearly the solution. This was how she would save her own life. Such events were crammed with stalkers, weirdos, and some disgruntled former fans who claimed that they had lost their fortunes believing in her wealth techniques

and investing in her--well, she didn't need to dwell on this. Suffice it to say that, as is the case with all influential humans, she had her enemies.

Apparently, one of them wanted to kill her.

She would simply cancel her speech at the seminar. And she knew where she would spend that time instead. She knew exactly how she would spend the entire twenty-four hour day. She would spend it sitting in the emergency room of the finest hospital in the world, with all the best doctors and medical equipment and medicines--and it conveniently happened to be located right in her city, just a couple of blocks away. She would take a thermos full of Long Island iced tea, just for giggles.

Rhoda patted herself on the back, metaphorically speaking. Problem solved.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN:
A VERY IMPORTANT MAN

“Yo, Doc! Hey Doc! DOC!” he bellowed. The loud calls came from a short man in a pricey suit, with gold rings on his fingers, and shoes that clicked on the tiles as he hurried after a white clad gentleman at the far end of the hall. The doctor heard the yelling and turned. The man in the shiny suit thrust out his hand.

“Tony Carpaccio, glad to make your acquaintance,” said the man, shaking the doctor’s hand hard enough to crush his operating fingers, a signature move of Carpaccio’s, meant to send a warning and compensate for his diminutive stature.

“I been trying to talk with that nurse, but it’s like she dodges me every time she sees me. What’s up with that?”

“Uh, I don’t--”

“Anyways, what I wanted to talk to you about is the possibility of checking my uncle out of here and taking him to a place I found in Europe. He misses the old country.”

“He told me he was born in Ypsilanti.”

“Yeah, well he’s been to the old country, and his people are from the old country, and he told me he misses it. I figure he’d rather die there, among, you know, the spirits of his ancestors.”

“Ah. I see. But he always tells me how much he likes it here.”

“He’s polite, that way.”

“He has parties every night. And they’re not against the rules, so we can’t stop him.”

“He’s brave, that way. Putting up a facade,” said Carpaccio.

The doctor noticed that the little man pronounced the “c” like a “k.” Clearly Carpaccio had read the word, but was not acquainted with people who used it.

“He raised me, you know. My parents died when I was just a little guy. He’s like a father to me. I know him better than he knows himself.”

The doctor nodded largely.

“So anyways, I figure I’ll take him back to the old country, and to his people, back to Yerp, so he can pass away in peace.”

“Have you picked out a facility? He needs treatments.”

“Yeah. It’s in the Netherlands.”

“Hm. Gotcha. The Netherlands, where euthanasia is legal?”

“Is it? I didn’t know that.”

“Yes, it just so happens to be. So, ‘Anthony Carpaccio?’ You must be named after him. His full name is Anthony Angelo Carpaccio?”

“That’s right. Like I said, he’s like a father to me.”

“And his people, the Carpaccios, are from Holland?”

“Look, what is it your business? I just want to make him happy.”

“Oh, he’s happy. He had a hooker in last night, I heard.”

“Hey, pal, I just happen to be a lawyer in addition to being a hedge fund advisor. Oh, by the way, here’s my card if you happen to know anybody who needs my services--”

And then, displaying his appalling lack of context, Carpaccio flashed his capped teeth for a split second and handed a linen business card to the doctor.

“--But like I said, I am a lawyer, and I know just how ugly this could get, if this place stands in my way. I don’t wanna make threats--”

“Then don’t.”

“Look, I don’t know if you know who I am.”

“I do. But the law states simply that your uncle is the one who decides where he stays, and where he gets his treatment.”

“Yeah, but what if he’s declared incompetent?”

“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, does it?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means this conversation is finished.”

The doctor turned and resumed his way down the long corridor, Carpaccio clicking angrily after him.

“Ok, but this isn’t over!”

“Yeah it is. Gramps stays. And you--send me some wooden shoes, Tony, from the old country. Oh, and say hello to the President. Ever since I was a kid, I’ve dreamed of meeting a sitting President.”

A few yards away, sitting in a chair and pretending to flip through a magazine, Reggie took in the whole scene, shaking his head. Reggie had seen the ominous numbers floating over the skull of the fast talking man in the shiny grey suit, as soon as he left his uncle’s room. And Reggie couldn’t help but remember that the uncle in question was one of the residents to whom

Reggie had made a sacred promise--that he would warn any near and dear ones of what he saw, if he saw it. Reggie still had a couple of days to tell the guy--to tell the guy, and still let the guy have enough time to get his affairs in order, whatever the hell that meant in this particular case.

And so here is what Reggie's hacking told him about Carpaccio:

He was an investment broker, but he was oh, so much more. He was a lawyer, but he had never practiced law. It would have required, it seems, too much coloring inside the lines. He had founded his own "global alternative investment firm", called Cloudbridge Platinum Capital, although when pressed on talk shows, he was never able to completely explain what was meant by the platinum part. The firm did not deal in platinum; apparently Carpaccio just liked the sound of it. He also liked his own name: he had announced from time to time, when publicly drunk, that being named for raw meat appealed to him, and that a lust for bloody flesh was what you needed to succeed in this world. Particularly in his unique corner of it.

Although the law had never caught up with him (as far as Reggie's hacking could discern), Carpaccio had a long history of running Ponzi schemes, binary options, pump 'n dumps, you name it--and somehow, he had always been able to avoid getting caught.

Several people killed themselves when, thanks to Carpaccio, they lost everything. Ask Carpaccio, and he would have dubbed it social Darwinism at its finest.

Back when he worked for WestOne Bank, he had no trouble evicting people, particularly seniors. It wasn't that he had anything against seniors, he just knew that seniors had fewer resources to fight the bank, and that invariably made his life easier. (Plus half of them were senile anyway.) He evicted old people, and he evicted young families. He evicted cats and dogs, he

evicted people just a little bit behind, and he evicted people who had lived in their homes for half a century.

Most importantly though, he was a scammer and a schemer, and what made him all the more scary is that more often than not, he operated just within the bounds of the law.

Except when he didn't. When he had finally crossed a line, and evicted an old lady (true story) — for owing thirty-seven cents on her mortgage, the pretty news anchor who broke the story, and who caused Carpaccio to be fired from the bank as a kind of sacrificial lamb, somehow ended up being mugged and badly beaten that same week.

Those who believe in karma might be starting to think that the K word was planning on sucker punching Carpaccio soon, and in a way more final and frightening than poor Carpaccio could imagine.

Oh, and as for his stint with the President — the last “President of the United States”, before the President managed to have his title changed, adding “Rex” to it — that brief tenure of Carpaccio's is all pretty much public knowledge, and I am sure you don't have to be told about that whole ridiculous and tragic debacle again.

But, in spite of how contemptible Carpaccio may have turned out to be, Reggie had made a promise. He had made a promise that he would tell Anthony Carpaccio what was to become of him.

And so he headed down the hall to confront the President's spokeshole.

“WHAT THE FUCK? WHO THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?” was the first thing out of Carpaccio's mouth.

It was like a horrible reprise of when he'd told A.J. the Corrupt Cop. Only this time, Reggie was not standing, so Anthony Carpaccio couldn't exactly grab him by the collar and shove him into the wall. (Reggie had purposely

repositioned himself; the two of them had a water cooler between them.) Instead, Carpaccio shoved him in the chest, and did so with such force that Reggie's chair toppled over and he went skidding across the floor until he ran into a ficus plant. Carpaccio was looming over Reggie.

“What the hell does that mean, ‘I’m gonna die in a week!’, you four eyed fart!”

And then, as Reggie was getting up, Carpaccio, who was coming at him again, stopped, and smiled weirdly.

“Oh wait, I get it. This is a trap. You’re recording me. This is just like that kovfefe at the New Yorker Magazine, where that bitch set me up.”

“No, it’s not, I swear. I can prove everything I’m saying to you!”

“Where’s the mic? You got one of those little button cameras?”

Carpaccio tore open Reggie’s shirt with a flourish. Then, suddenly, Carpaccio seemed to become aware of himself. What if he was being filmed? That ripping of the shirt had been incredibly stupid; it came across as bad gay rape porn.

As had been the pattern for poor Reggie, matters simmered down after a few minutes. Reggie did what he could to put himself back together. Carpaccio smoothed his hair back. It had been liberally lubricated with product earlier that morning, so it complied--as all complied with the whims and whams of the sycophant Carpaccio.

He and Reggie went into the anti-room where Reggie had his video outfit set up. Reggie then calmly proceeded to attempt to convince Anthony Carpaccio that a week hence, he would indeed meet his Maker.

The thing is, as angry as Carpaccio was at Reggie for dropping this mortality bomb on him, he was secretly terrified. You see, Carpaccio was of a wonderfully wild and mixed ethnicity, mostly Italian but not without some gypsy blood--and, he had learned to his shock and surprise when viewing his federally mandated DNA results, even a bit of African blood. This marvelous swirl of mysticism and magic roiled deep in his veins; he had a grandmother and other female relatives who had proven to many people, Carpaccio among them, that they could glimpse other worlds, talk to spirits, and sometimes predict the future.

This damn kid Reggie's "proof" was unsettling. It could have been a carnival trick. But what if it was not? What if Reggie had the gift, just as his aunt had predicted the death of Carpaccio's dog, back when "Carpe" was only nine, and it had happened the next day, just the way she had said it would?

Yet in his eternal and unbending arrogance, Carpaccio was not afraid. He had a plan: a few weeks prior to meeting Reggie, after the eighth credible death threat that Carpaccio had gotten from the relative of someone who had committed suicide because they had lost everything through Carpaccio's investments, Carpaccio had taken steps. Serious action.

He had immediately cracked open his nest egg and invested in the best safe room money could buy. It involved purchasing the apartment next door to the one he owned, both situated in a pricey midtown skyscraper, but it was worth it. He had long known that the luxurious dwelling next door had a feature that his did not--said safe room. And he had long coveted the feature.

The deal went smoothly, as Carpaccio was offering all cash, and he managed to close the deal in seventy-two hours. That had all happened a couple of months before this twerp grim reaper confronted Carpaccio in the

halls of the hospice. So after looking at the damning proof with Reggie, Carpaccio ran home and stood in his safe room.

It was a thing of beauty. A regular fortress.

It had, as you might expect, locks that were absolutely impenetrable from the outside, an air filtration system, and ballistic fiberglass walls that could withstand a bomb hit. It had an off-the-grid power system. Infrared cameras monitored the exterior room's perimeter, facial recognition software allowed for keyless entry, and a single button (this was one of Ant'ny's favorite features) activated plumes of fog designed to disorient intruders. You could actually pick from a panel of buttons, which determined if the gas fog was just mace-level, permanently blinding, or fully lethal. Carpaccio had tested it on some animals he'd picked up from the local shelter. You couldn't be too careful.

But the safe room was about so much more than mere security. The safe room was luxurious, as well. It had a fully functioning kitchen, with enough food for a year. He had laid in a few cases of marvelous wines, and the liquor cabinet was fully stocked. Carpaccio had also purchased a few pieces of top of the line gym equipment. He was not coming out of hiding from whatever hell on earth the devil had planned looking like a blob of Crisco. The safe room (safe apartment, really) was also (of course) appointed with thousand thread count Egyptian cotton sheets, and some lovely works of art that he had pilfered from the foreclosed homes of some once wealthy people whose fortunes had suddenly and mysteriously changed. Seriously lovely pieces, I'm telling you.

So Anthony had all that going for him.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE GRIFTERS

These preceding dark details about Anthony Carpaccio, Rhoda Embers, and A.J. the Corrupt Cop, were all matters that Reggie had learned about through his extraordinary hacking skills. The dirt was everywhere: there were lawsuits that had been filed against Rhoda Embers and Anthony Carpaccio, as well as good old fashioned newspaper reporting that was critical and skewering. And in A.J.'s case, Reggie had gained access to private precinct files involving Internal Affairs. Reggie was even able to find information on the dark web: threats, dirty deals, and how some people planned to possibly “off” the likes of these three corrupt people. (And vice versa? Chilling.)

In the case of Joe and DebOrah, it ended up being a matter of good old fashioned shadowing. Gum shoe tailing. Reggie would never forget his first encounter with them. Of all the people that he had met following the bestowing of this mind numbing gift, they were surely the creepiest.

By the way--regarding the spelling of DebOrah's name. Like many Bohemian souls, DebOrah wished desperately to appear unique and rare to the world, but she was not. She was as common as weeds in your lawn. She secretly sensed this, and so she created an elaborate façade, and assiduously created all the trappings of individuality. (Had she put this much effort into actually creating a personality for herself, her entire life might have ended up differently, Reggie would later muse.) You were not to call her "DEborah." You were to call her Deb-O-rah, with an accent on the long "O" middle syllable. You could read from the faces of those first encountering her that they regarded this as rather stupid and pretentious.

As for Joe, there was no hiding who or what he was. Half of his teeth were gone, and his breath smelled as though he had been chewing on dead rats. He was a chronic, proud, manic meth head. "I love this shit!" he was often heard to bellow during the first few minutes of a meth high. "I am never giving it up!" And so it logically followed that he would also never give up his grifting and thievery, as a way to support his habit.

Joe and DebOrah were lurking around her mother's room at the hospice, and a person only had to overhear their conversation to know that they were just waiting for her to die, so they could swoop down on her money.

"Cripes, DebOrah, wasn't she supposed to kick off last year, before Christmas?"

"My mom has always had the constitution of Robocop."

"Well this is messed up, man. We had plans. Opportunities had presented themselves, man. This is fucked up."

"I know. Joe, I was thinking. It would really be the merciful thing to help her along. Just end the whole thing, for chrissake!"

"Merciful, yes, but dangerous. If anyone sees, if anyone finds out--"

“Oh babe, you know I’d be discreet. Really careful.”

“Yeah, that’s what you said the last two times, and look how that turned out!”

And of course, Reggie was lurking nearby during all of this. His blood ran cold. But, he had made a promise to Hermione just that morning:

“Oh Reggie, I needed to know that my daughter is going to be O.K. She’s always had such a self-destructive tendency . . . and I was so hoping that you could use, you know, your ‘gift’ . . . so you understand, yes? ”

She had said this to Reggie as she clutched his hand, and stared up at him from eyes that still twinkled through the pain and fear.

In hindsight, Reggie realized that Hermione was just too kind and pure of soul to realize how villainous and blackhearted DebOrah truly was. Besides, he was, truthfully, kind of looking forward to delivering the morbid news. As he sat in that cold plastic chair in the hallway (he was actually starting to get used to all of this), he listened to the conversation between the two grifters, trying to figure out how to best approach them. Watching them out of the corner of his eye was eerie. It sickened him:

“OK, Joe, you keep watch, then I’ll start talking to her, and when she’s relaxed, I’ll--”

“No, DebOrah! Remember when she had that maid working for her, and then stuff went missing, and it turns out your mom had a nanny cam? Since then, she’s always had one. Now she’s living in a creepy death building with desperate strangers who have nothing to lose. She’s always been a paranoid old bat, what makes you think she doesn’t have a hidden camera in there now? With instructions for whoever finds it to review it carefully. All we need to do is get seen, and you are back in jail. And this time, it’s not just a year behind bars for ripping off those assclowns at Make-A-Wish.”

“Hey, that almost worked--”

“No, DebOrah. We wait. OK? We wait.”

Reggie lurked in the shadows until they left the hallway, then followed them down to the cafeteria. It was strange--DebOrah was a short and scrawny woman, but of all the people who had beaten the crap out of him since this entire bizarre nightmare began, it was this new Medusa-like creature who frightened Reggie the most. For some reason, he mused to himself, she seemed like someone who could be deadly dangerous.

He asked them if he could sit down with them, and they scowled, but nodded assent. And then, he started into the dreaded conversation. It was an old conversation to him by now, well rehearsed, and he always braced himself for the freaky array of responses that he received. Still, he never could know when he would be attacked or hurt. Killing the messenger, and all that. It was ironic: he could predict the day when someone was going to die. But he couldn't see a mean left hook coming.

But this creepy chick surprised him in her reaction. DebOrah believed in mystical matters and cosmic gifts, such as this one that had been bestowed upon Reggie--and as much as they had not wanted this pipsqueak to sit down next to them, nonetheless, they completely believed what he was saying.

Joe always looked to DebOrah, following her cues. As soon as Reggie started in on his proofs, she began nodding in a bizarre kind of affirmation. Perhaps there was something deep in her gypsy soul that could read Reggie more than he could have imagined, but suffice it to say, she believed him. She believed him right away.

Given his track record, Reggie was shocked. DebOrah didn't scream at him, and Joe didn't assault him. They just stared at him. And stared at him some more. And for the life of him, Reggie could not figure out the meaning

behind those stares. Usually, he was pretty good at this kind of thing. But he could not figure out what was going on in their brains, after this bombshell revelation.

Joe squinted at Reggie, his pupils the size of purely theoretical particles.

“I suppose it isn’t so freaky that you see the same date of death floating above both of our heads, since me and my babe are never apart.”

“Yes,” said Reggie, toneless. He wasn’t sure where this was going. And then, DebOrah asked him the most unexpected question he had ever heard in all his Reaper revelations.

“Exactly what font is the lettering above our heads? And people’s heads in general? Is it always the same?”

Reggie blinked a couple of times, wondering if this was a trick.

“Well, uh, it’s not lettering as much as numbers. You know, month slash day slash year. Pretty standard. No font, per se.”

“And no words? No commentary above or below the numbers?”

DebOrah persisted.

Reggie shook his head. Perhaps she did not have an angle. Perhaps she was just curious.

“And the color of the numbers?”

“Oh, that’s easy. White, if the date is really far out. Then it turns to a very light pink, turning to a dark pink, then shades of red, as the date gets closer--”

Reggie stopped. He realized it was getting personal.

“So I guess we must be a real bloody red, then?”

This from Joe.

DebOrah and Joe both picked up on the impact that their questions were having on Reggie. So Joe offered, in a conciliatory tone, “Hey man. It’s cool. I

mean, it's a bummer, but now that we know, we can avoid it, right? So that's actually very cool. I mean, imagine if we hadn't met you!"

"Yeah. Imagine." muttered Reggie.

"Well. We got plans to make, I guess, right?"

Reggie nodded. He did not feel like broaching the point that their death was almost certainly inevitable.

Joe and DebOrah got up calmly to take their leave, as though Reggie had just told them a meter maid was ticketing their car in the parking lot. As the two addled hippies made their way down the hall, DebOrah turned around and yelled to Reggie.

"What shade of blood red? Bright red, like a small drop of fresh blood? Blackish bloody, like a puddle at a murder scene? Double dark ochre, like the letters were written in dried blood-ink?"

Cripes, she was weird, thought Reggie. He continued down the hall in the other direction, his back to them, pretending he hadn't heard her.

As soon as Joe and DebOrah were alone in their battered VW van (which was both their ride and their home), they spoke in conspiratorial tones.

"So you believe him, babe?"

This from Joe. DebOrah was five years his senior, and the Alpha in all things between them.

"Yes, honey. You know my mother was a gypsy. You know that I am from a long line of gypsies. Fuck people who badmouth gypsies. Mom had the gift. She really did. And I have it, sometimes. Shit, I wish I had it more often, I could make a killing. But yeah, Joe, I believe it. And we saw the proof, that dork actually showed us the proof."

Joe swallowed hard. "Babe, you're telling me . . . that you believe we're going to die?"

“No Joe, no, of course not. That is, we are going to die--but only in *one version of the future*. We have the power to change that future. Why would someone be given the gift, if people weren't free to act on the information?”

“Yeah. Right.”

DebOrah laughed, in that superior way she had.

“Don't you see, Joe? It's obvious. We both know exactly where we were going to be on the big death day, right?”

“Yeah, sure. We were taking the bus to Coachella East.”

“Right, and how many times in the past did we joke about how that bus is a death trap, and the whole ride a disaster waiting to happen?”

“Oh! Yeah.... So we--”

“--so we hate the idea of not going to Coachella this year. But according to the fates, we'd never make it even if we did get on the bus.”

“But couldn't we get there some other way? Yeah, Wallie is always high as a kite when he drives that bus, everyone is, but what if we just got there some other way--”

“No. It's too risky. I mean, what if we get to Coachella that same day, and we get killed there? No, Joe. That version of the future, where we die, has us at Coachella. So we avoid Coachella. In fact, I know exactly where we will spend that day.”

“Where?”

DebOrah said nothing, but just offered him a wicked grin.

I suppose one could say that Joe and DebOrah warrant a book of their own. A compact novella, perhaps, or possibly a chapbook. A “how-to” treatise on uber-grifting. (I actually met them myself once, but again, that is a

different story.) But this is Reggie's book, so here is a brief overview of one week in the life of these thieves.

SATURDAY

Saturday was apparently free food day for Joe and DebOrah. This story takes place, you will remember, in a densely populated city, so if you were willing to drive thirty miles in any direction, you could find an abundance of food banks whose doors were open every day of the month, Monday through Sunday.

Reggie watched in awe as Joe and DebOrah worked it with more cunning than he would have thought them capable. Computers in food banks now talked to each other, so that grifters didn't double, triple, quadruple dip. But J & D had that covered. They simply produced a different form of identification each place they went. Food banks were low on the security totem pole, and hence the volunteers were content to just eyeball the ID, letting the deeper embedded security measures, invisible to the naked eye, slide by. DebOrah then produced "proof" of the large and loving family whom she had to feed. And as she shared the family photos, she told tearful stories about how much she loved them and how they suffered so, and oh how terribly burdensome was her responsibility. Heartbreaking.

At each and every food bank, they walked away with a whole van full of food. And when they had done this a whole bunch of times, they set up a stand in their neighborhood, sold the food, and managed to grift themselves one hundred and forty three bucks. Reggie was hovering nearby. He was stunned. Then they stopped by an acquaintance's house on their way back, stayed inside for about twenty minutes, and floated back out the door on a cloud of meth.

SUNDAY

Even in this brave new world of the near-future, come Sunday around the world, Salvation Army stores would close their doors so that the salvation soldiers could go to church and listen to sermons and read Bible verses and sing hymns, and pray for the sinners and the homosexuals and so forth and so on. Sunday was also the day when other types of folks had the day off and took that time to clean out the garage and clear out the attic and haul things off to the loading docks of their local Salvation Army, where they would then dump the detritus of their middle class life: ugly furniture and bags of clothes, broken toys and old kitchenware, crap from last Christmas that wouldn't fit in storage. Etcetera, etcetera.

And it was on Sundays that Joe and DebOrah always stopped by the Salvation Army. The Salvation Army, with its door locked and its windows shuttered. And with its abundance of donations piled up near the rear door, just ready and waiting for Joe and DebOrah to load into their VW van.

From there, it was on to the local flea market, where Joe and DebOrah, too cheap to rent a stall, sold the items from out of the back of their van. Nobody bothered them, as Reggie observed from a discreet distance: they made two hundred and sixty-eight dollars that day. The gorgeous art deco lamp and the large velvet curtains donated to the Salvation Army by the high school theater helped hike up the take. They looked quite pleased with themselves, laughing and joking as Reggie watched through binoculars. Then, they drove to the notorious eastern edge of New Franklin Park, and scored.

MONDAY

You're getting the idea, yes? It is a beautiful Monday morning. DebOrah argoshows up at someone's front door. Reggie overhears her talking to the sweet little old lady who answers the front door:

"Good morning, ma'am. I'm the senior citizen caregiver from Craigslist. I've got plenty of letters of reference."

"Of course dear, do come in, I've been expecting you."

Reggie spied from his usual distance, as DebOrah actually handed the silver haired woman a business card.

DebOrah left several hours later, her large valise much fatter than it had been upon arrival. Reggie assumed that the sweet little old lady would never see DebOrah again. And later, overheard by Reggie:

"This was the best haul yet! Let's party, babe."

Then, they headed back to their bleak little lot on the edge of the city, where they parked their van, and they proceeded to take a long nap, from the afternoon till just past midnight.

Reggie had arranged it so that he did not have to be around them all the time, in order to track their grifts and crimes. Arranging some ultra-cheap remote cams that fed into his home system had been easy-peasy. Meanwhile, he could stay cocooned inside all day, cozy and close to the fridge, sharing snacks with Hawking. It was dark out and approaching midnight when he got a laptop alert and watched on the screen as the pair emerged from their vehicle, stretching and yawning. Reggie dressed quickly and ran to his car. He sped across town to where they were parked. They were already on the road by the time Reggie got there, but the covertly placed tracker on their van put him

right on their trail. He followed them from a safe distance as they cruised pricey neighborhoods, stopping only for a few seconds to ninja across somebody's front lawn and grab valuables from the front porches of unsuspecting folks who were snoring away in some warm bedroom on the second floor.

Within a couple of hours, they had crammed the VW van full of beautiful wind chimes, bird baths, garden gnomes, statues, welcome plaques, as well as a few bicycles. Then they made their way to a bad part of town where they accessed a broken down storage unit. Their plan, no doubt, was to wait for the flea markets and estate sales and yard sales that were only held on the weekends. Reggie took it all in from a distance, fascinated.

TUESDAY

Tuesday was library day. Jo and DebOrah spent the day hogging the library computers and setting up fake GoFundMe accounts with fake sob stories and fake sad pictures. Even now, in these dark times, the gullibles were still falling for this crap. Even more so: when the Apocalypse seems imminent, saving your own soul through acts of random kindness becomes more urgent than ever; hence the donations. But Joe and DebOrah would have to wait a while for this money to flow in. So far, Reggie observed, it had been two days without cash income, so the grifters did not get high that night. Instead, they fought and screamed, a meth-withdrawal fueled grand opera being played out within the tight confines of that VW van. Not being high was a f*cking bitch.

WEDNESDAY

The fact that Wednesday was devoted to panhandling might seem tame compared to the shenanigans of the previous days, but you had to have seen it from Reggie's point of view.

And so I will do that for you:

DebOrah was dressed surprisingly well. Gone were the hippie duds, dirty leather, and ugly handmade jewelry. Instead, she looked oddly not herself in slacks and a polo shirt, with a sweater tied around her neck. She drove the van to a nice suburban house, walked up the impeccably manicured front walk, and knocked on the door.

Reggie was watching from a safe distance, and you can imagine his surprise when DebOrah was warmly welcomed. A thirty-something woman answered, holding a baby. They hugged, then both went inside and shut the door. Just a couple of minutes later, the woman came out carrying a purse, keys, and a coat. No baby. She got in her car and drove away.

Ten minutes after that, DebOrah came out with the baby. She got in the van, drove it to a freeway off-ramp, and parked the van in a vacant lot. She pulled a large, raggedy shirt over her nice clothes, then picked up the baby and trudged towards the off-ramp. She planted herself at a stop light at the base of the off-ramp. Then she produced a sign from her bag: "FLEEING ABUSIVE HOME PLEASE HELP" She clutched the baby, and stared forlornly at the cars that passed by.

Reggie stared in amazement. He had long been fascinated by the behavior of humans, and this was not the first panhandler he had studied. Males, he had observed, had a harder time of it. People were leary, suspicious, and generally less sympathetic. But this poor, abused woman and her baby tugged at the heartstrings. Driver after driver after driver rolled down a

window to chat with the tragic figure, as the line of cars waited at the stop light.

Reggie was now watching her through binoculars. He recalled that when he and Russell used to study panhandlers for a class project, the brothers noticed that the men usually got handed a crumpled dollar bill, or small change.

But DebOrah was getting five, tens, even some twenties. The baby made all the difference.

Reggie remained vigilant, even as the light fell and the temperature dropped. DebOrah clearly had a plan. She kept checking her watch, and left at about nine o'clock in the evening. She got back to the house about twenty minutes before the mother came home.

The mother was smiling when she let herself into her own home, and DebOrah was smiling when she left a few minutes later with yet another wad of cash in her hand. The mother was at the front door, holding the giggling baby, and waving goodbye to DebOrah.

DebOrah drove away, and then went back to rendezvous with Joe, who was hanging out at a nearby bodega. Reggie, following from a discreet distance, heard DebOrah announce her total proudly: seven hundred and twenty four dollars, for ten hours of work.

THURSDAY

It was on Thursday that Reggie learned there was still money in dogs. Good money. Through all of the volatile politics and global upheaval, through the fraying of society's fabric and the deepening of divisions between human

beings of every ilk and stripe, people still loved their dogs. You could say it was one of the few things left that most folks had in common anymore.

Reggie learned the monetary value of dogs in a horrific way. On Thursday. The grifters had it down to a slick system, Reggie had to give them that. They had clearly researched this. And they were practiced. Very practiced.

The first stop was at an old folk's home. Reggie had followed the van from a safe distance, and once they arrived at Twilight Acres Senior Living, Reggie parked at the other end of the lot. He waited a couple of minutes, then followed DebOrah through the front door. Joe did not go in with DebOrah. He stayed in the vehicle and kept the engine running. Already, noted Reggie, this seemed very suspicious.

Once inside Twilight Acres, Reggie observed DebOrah casually milling around on the main floor. There was a living area with a cheery fireplace, cafeteria, and a little library. Reggie had a baseball cap pulled low, and he studied DebOrah from a distance. What the heck was her angle, he wondered? He was even more perplexed when he saw her strike up a conversation with a young woman who was a visiting volunteer. And who did this good samaritan have with her? Her faithful therapy dog. It was an adorable white Westie, with a little sign around its neck that said "Westie Bestie!"

DebOrah was engrossed in her conversation with the volunteer, so she did not notice when Reggie sidled down the hall just close enough to overhear what was being said, but not so close as to be noticed. DebOrah was blabbing some line about having owned a Westie as a child and how wasn't it interesting that Alfred Hitchcock was crazy over his little West Highland Terrier? Reggie rolled his eyes. Then it came. The climax of the short con:

"Sure, I'll watch him for you while you pop in the bathroom. We're good buddies now!" effused DebOrah.

And with that, the volunteer popped into the ladies' room.

And with that, DebOrah was out the rear door. Joe was there waiting. She jumped in the van, and they sped off. And nobody knew a goddamn thing.

Reggie stood there for a moment, gobsmacked. That, he had not seen coming. He knew better than to start bellowing and making a scene. He even knew better than to report their tags. He had already noticed them switching tags half a dozen times--who knew who they really were, where they lived, their true identities?

The next abduction was ridiculously easy to pull off--so much so that Reggie had to wonder how many owners had been torn apart from their beloved pets to date, by this cruel little plot. (He did not know at this point what had happened to the poor little white Westie.)

Once again, Reggie observed from a distance as Joe parked on the edge of a tiny woods adjoining a dog park. Meanwhile, DebOrah entered the park from the other side, to distract people in the park, of course. Of course. Reggie was watching through binoculars, and he could see that DebOrah was, while crying real tears, showing her "LOST DOG" sign to the people in the park. And nothing is catnip to dog lovers more than an owner with a lost dog sign. Reggie was sure that this dog on the flier was pure clip art; these two seemed incapable of taking care of each other or themselves, much less an innocent canine. But once again, Reggie had to agree that the scheme was kind of brilliant. Joe was now on the edge of the woods near the park, and had lured a gorgeous Lhasa Apso into the woods. And in the blink of an eye, man and dog were gone. Meanwhile, on the other side of the park, DebOrah thanked the people weakly and trudged off. She too had disappeared into the throngs on the sidewalk by the time a woman began shrieking about her missing dog.

There was another heist that was fast and clearly unplanned. As Joe and DebOrah were driving by the neighborhood community center, they spotted that someone had stopped in front of the community center with their car motor running, leaving the air conditioning on for the dog inside. It was a warm day, and the driver only planned to be gone for a couple of minutes. That was all it would take to deliver the tray of cakes for the bake sale. It was also all the time it would take for Joe and DebOrah to grab the dog.

But they were saving the best for last. They went to the boardwalk, a place known far and wide for dog walking. Dog owners made their way here every day to take in the sunshine, show off their furballs, and meet other like-minded dog lovers. On the boardwalk, you could buy all manner of snacks--lemonade, ice cream, hot dogs, vegan dogs. You could buy boogie boards and sunglasses and knock-off designer clothing. A good time was had by all. One particularly nice feature offered the dog walkers was the mobile grooming van that would groom your dog while you took a dip in the ocean.

Except that the grooming van and your dog were gone by the time you returned. Granted, this was not the perfect crime. You couldn't repeat it very often in the same place. But the Jersey shore and beyond were littered with such places, and it was easy to swap out vehicles, simply changing the magnetic grooming signs and the top mount sign from one van to another. You could always borrow another fringer's van for a while, if you gave him a part of your profit. And as for patterns of crime looked for--well, the headlines were so relentlessly depressing, and the beach frequenters too generally stoned out of their gourds, to remember such things for very long.

The entire day had sickened and horrified poor Reggie.

And as if Reggie was not horrified enough, he was even more repulsed when he followed the grifters to the edge of town, then into a more rural area, and proceeded to watch Joe and DebOrah sell the dogs to the owner of a grim and torturous puppy mill farm. Reggie knew he needed to figure out what the hell he was going to do about this. Alerting the authorities in this day and age would only assure that the dogs got euthanized sooner. There was no money in any budgets to care for animals that had gotten separated from their owners. The only comfort Reggie experienced on that dark day was the knowledge that this pair of grifters would be dead soon.

Hopefully.

FRIDAY

Finally, the day arrived. The ominous date that Reggie had seen floating over both their heads.

Bright and early, per their plan--where could they be safer than in a house of worship?--Joe and DebOrah showed up at St. Anne's Church to help the ladies' club sort contributions for the upcoming church rummage sale. Getting up early had been easy for them, since they had never gone to bed, and they were both coked to the gills on some lovely lines of confidence that had taken them from late in the night to early in the morning. Mezcal in coffee had gotten them out the door. But none of the church ladies noticed that the two volunteers were higher than a couple of cosmonauts. Joe and DebOrah were too well rehearsed in hiding it. And the ladies were too thrilled with the extra-energetic help to see the obvious.

Joe and DebOrah helped themselves to some free church coffee, DebOrah jamming handfuls of artificial sweetener in her purse. The two of them giggled with their heads together.

“Am I a fucking genius or what?” Joe cackled, grinding his teeth cheerfully. “We were going to be on that assclown’s bus today. I always knew it was an accident waiting to happen; now, thanks to the weirdo, we know when the accident was going to happen. Cheating death, babe, cheating death!”

And then he high-fived his babe, Deb. He looked stupid doing it. Stupid, like a cocky, high, white bastard. But he didn’t know, and he didn’t care. He just cackled some more, and helped himself to a cruller from the heaping plate.

“Yoo-hoo, you two!” chirped an annoyingly cheerful woman at the end of the hall. “*DEborah*--”

“Uh, it’s not *DEborah*,” crabbed our villainess, with a touch of condescension in her voice. “That’s so boring, isn’t it? It’s *DeBORah*. If you don’t mind.”

“Oh, well, whatever. Dear, I need you in this room, hanging up clothes from the most recent bags of contributions. And Joe, did you say your name was Joe?, Betty-Jean could use you upstairs. We’re replacing the old cross with a fancy new one today, and we need a big strong man like you. Personally, I liked the old cross better, but when the pastor’s wife gets an idea in her head, and . . . well, who am I to gossip?”

Joe pecked DebOrah on the cheek and trotted upstairs, full of verve. DebOrah sashayed into a stinky room piled high with brown bags. Each bag was crammed full of clothes. Man, she thought to herself, would she be happy when this stupid day was done. Cheating death was one big fat pain in the ass.

A woman who bore a striking resemblance to Aunt Bee bustled in with further instructions.

“Dear, don’t forget to go through all the pockets. And brace yourself, dear, you may be shocked at what you find. Beulah Jean has found more than one prophylactic, I am sorry to say. Although, I do suppose that finding a condom is better than the alternative, if you know what I mean.”

DebOrah thought the woman would never shut up. God, what she would give for a line or a hit right about now.

“Then again, Beulah has found money on more than one occasion. Once, a hundred dollar bill! Which she put right back into the offering plate, I am proud to say. I must confess, I don’t know that I would have had that kind of selflessness in me, if I had found it . . .”

This news about the money rekindled DebOrah’s interest in the project, and she doubled her speed, cramming her bony hands into pockets and then throwing items of clothing on the cheap wire hangers. But after only a few minutes, DebOrah once again started to lose steam. She started formulating excuses to beg off, or at least escape to the parking lot for a quick hit from her crack pipe.

And that was when she felt it, buried in the pocket of some hard-scrabbled leather trench coat. The plastic squishy lovely touch that could only be a baggy full of powder. DebOrah glowed. She flashed a toothy, some-teeth-missing, dragon smile at nobody in particular.

She brushed by the laboring biddies, with some excuse about needing the toilet, and within seconds of locking herself in a stall smelling of hyacinth (most church bathrooms were gorgeous, she noted, as was this one, with its wallpaper and border print at the top, and ceramic soap dispensers that weren’t even nailed down, stupid Christians, and lots of toilet paper and cleaners under the cupboard, free for the taking, naive churchgoing boobs),

she had poured a wee pile and cut it into a lovey line using her SNAP card. She rolled up a dollar bill, inhaled, smiled, and leaned back on the toilet. Within seconds, she began convulsing, wild seizures wracking her body. The toiletries she had stolen spilled out of her dropped purse. Foam began to ooze out of her mouth, flowing over her bluing lips. Her wide-open eyes stared up at the floral border print. She gasped. And that was it. DebOrah was dead.

Meanwhile, upstairs, Joe was helping Beulah and Betty-Jean with switching the altar crosses. He lugged the new one from the back of a delivery truck and pulled away the reams of brown paper. He stared at it in awe. It was huge, seven feet tall at least. It might have been garish to some, but Joe thought that its inlaid pearls and jewels and ivory were gorgeous. So much so, Joe thought with no small degree of remorse, that this was one of those objects it would be hard to part with, once he had purloined it. Man, would it look great in his storage unit office. And he knew just where he would hang it. The women left, leaving him alone with the ornate cross.

Joe's mind was a jumble of questions as he positioned the ladder so he could get the rough hewn old cross off of its massive hook and replace it with the new one.

He was already planning, troubleshooting, plotting the acquisition of this cool-as-shit-crucifix: it would happen under cover of darkness, when all the good Christians were back home in their beds, cozy and secure in their missionary sex marriages. Joe had immediately surmised that getting back into the church would be easy-peasy. He knew from past research that this particular church left some doors open at night. Some stupid philosophy about how the spiritually bereft should always have a safe port in the storm. And what locks they did use were cheap, a breeze to pick. Robbing this place would be as easy as popping a pimple. Godlovers always thought everybody should

share their wholesome values. Godlovers always thought God would watch over their shit.

Joe was getting a natural high just thinking about all this.
Maybe he should do it tonight?

But then, Joe thought as he climbed the ladder, his knees crying out in pain from meth arthritis, maybe he should let some time lapse between this stupid fake volunteer day and the day he actually stole the cross, lest these fools connect the dots, and think it was him. After all, thought Joe, people were always casting him disparaging glances, as though they knew he was a meth head, and therefore assumed he was a thief . . . Yes, YES!, Joe told himself, proud of his ability to spot trouble before it arrived, he would give it some time before he broke in and took the magnificent cross for himself. That way, the church congregation might very well think that it had been stolen by some member of the church congregation. Christians weren't beyond stealing someone's shit.

Joe summoned all his strength and hugged his arms around the old cross, embracing Christ's legs along with it. He took a deep breath and lifted. Meanwhile, he had another thought about the stealing of the new cross. Maybe waiting too long was not such a good idea, after all. What if some other junkie saw this fancy new cross and pinched it first?

But of course, you already know what happened next. Joe's legs gave way and he fell off the ladder, the cross coming down after him, crushing his emaciated body, the head of Christ banging smack into Joe's cranium and bashing through his skull. The crown of thorns dug long scratches across his face, and it looked as though even in death, Joe was crying tears of blood.

Thus ended the ghastly little lives of Joe and DebOrah. Soon, there would be twin screams emanating from both the main floor and the basement of the little church. It was very noisy, for a Friday morning. In fact later that week, when everybody chinwagged about the twin deaths, coming just minutes apart, they would note that they could never remember hearing anyone scream in church before.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN:
THE REAPER'S WALTZ . . . ALLEMANDE

And now, to the disposition of our three other unsavory characters.

A.J. THE CORRUPT COP
SLEEPING WITH THE FISHES

And then finally, on the third day after Reggie had given him the grim news, A.J. came up with a brilliant scheme, to save his own life. (Well, as brilliant as A.J. ever got.) He made a plan. On the date of his so-called death, he would go to work and spend the entire day, twenty-four hours straight, in the safest place he could think of: the precinct headquarters. What could possibly happen to a decent, brave cop like himself at precinct headquarters? He did not know why he hadn't thought of it before! Like all twenty-first century police departments, under the rule of The President Rex, they were fully militarized, hence fully protected. Nobody could walk

in without going through a metal detector and full body scan. The windows were all bulletproof, state of the art polycarbonate. An imposing line of tanks sat in the parking lot, as back-up to the traditional cruisers, animal control SUVs, and riot-ready gas wagons inspired by the genius of a braver, earlier century and a purer, more ruthless race. Nobody fucked with the precinct.

Perhaps A.J. had not truly taken into account just how much he was hated. Nor had he taken into account the fact that just because the windows were bulletproof, doesn't mean they were howitzer proof.

It was a fairly sophisticated howitzer, small and elegant, with pinpoint accuracy. It took out A.J., and his desk, and, tragically, the nice saltwater aquarium that the officer next to him had always meticulously maintained for the joy of the precinct. It did not go unobserved that more people were upset by the demise of several delicate lionfish than they were by the death of A.J.

Several of the police dashed to rescue the frantic, flapping fish before they turned their attention to A.J. And it is also worth noting that A.J.'s turmoiled soul, which did exist, (contrary to his beliefs), hovered above the scene, and witnessed all of this with a growing sense of despair and humiliation.

EMBERS: ASHES TO ASHES

Suffice it to say that, as is the case with all influential humans, she had her enemies.

Apparently, one of them wanted to kill her.

She would simply cancel her speech at the seminar. And she knew where she would spend that time instead. She knew exactly how she would spend the entire twenty-four hour day. She would spend it sitting in the emergency room of the finest hospital in the world, with all the best doctors and medical equipment and medicines--and it conveniently happened to be located right in her city, just a couple of blocks away. She would take a thermos full of Long Island iced tea, just for giggles.

Rhoda patted herself on the back, metaphorically speaking. Problem solved.

And so it was with a spring in her step that Rhoda Embers got off the elevator in her building and started walking the four blocks to the hospital, on that balmy summer night. She decided not to take a cab or an uber--always a chance that the person who wished her ill was some swarthy skinned driver. After all, one heard nightmarish stories about them all the time. Strolling seemed safest.

The city was alive with the hum and thrum of humanity. It was date night, it was the night to relax, the night to dine out, the night to dance, the night to see a good movie. God, she loved this city. As the song said, if you could make it here, you could make it anywhere.

She slipped into the emergency room unnoticed, preoccupied as everyone was with their own personal tragedies and dramas. She sat down in an annoyingly uncomfortable chair, and she poured herself a cup of Long Island iced tea to make up for the stiffness of her seating arrangement. She noted with a smirk she could not hide, that the woman across from her was reading her book, "The Treasure".

Perhaps it was the lulling effect of the Long Island iced tea, or Rhoda's fascination with the expressions on the face of the woman reading her book, but Rhoda did not notice--not soon enough, at least--when a crazed patient shot out of his bed in a nearby room, sprinted past the dozing police officer, and grabbed Rhoda for a hostage. (Reggie and the rest of the world would later learn that the patient was under guard and awaiting trial for stabbing his spouse and all his children.)

Different stories as to what happened next in that emergency room would emerge in the news, but the net result was that, as the police attempted to close in, the crazed patient slit Rhoda Embers' throat, and poor old Rhoda bled out in under a minute. Her last thought was of "The Treasure", and how surely, she could use the law of attraction to keep blood from spurting out of her body. Rhoda was wrong about this, as she had actually been wrong about pretty much everything in her life.

THE SAD END OF ANTHONY CARPACCIO

It was a thing of beauty. A regular fortress.

It had, as you might expect, locks that were absolutely impenetrable from the outside, an air filtration system, and ballistic fiberglass walls that could withstand a bomb hit. It had an off-the-grid power system. Infrared cameras monitored the exterior room's perimeter, facial recognition software allowed for keyless entry, and a single button (this was one of Ant'ny's favorite features) activated plumes of fog designed to disorient intruders. You could actually pick from a panel of buttons,

which determined if the gas fog was just mace-level, permanently blinding, or fully lethal. Carpaccio had tested it on some animals he'd picked up from the local shelter. You couldn't be too careful.

But the safe room was about so much more than mere security. The safe room was luxurious, as well. It had a fully functioning kitchen, with enough food for a year. He had laid in a few cases of marvelous wines, and the liquor cabinet was fully stocked. Carpaccio had also purchased a few pieces of top of the line gym equipment. He was not coming out of hiding from whatever hell on earth the devil had planned looking like a blob of Crisco. The safe room (safe apartment, really) was also (of course) appointed with thousand thread count Egyptian cotton sheets, and some lovely works of art that he had pilfered from the foreclosed homes of some once wealthy people whose fortunes had suddenly and mysteriously changed. Seriously lovely pieces, I'm telling you.

So Anthony had all that going for him.

It was into this room that Carpaccio trotted, just a few minutes before the midnight that would usher in the day he was slated to die. It was into this room that Carpaccio took some takeout Chinese and some mildly amusing porn. It was into this room that an airplane crashed when a suicidal pilot veered purposely off course, taking Carpaccio's life along with his own--and amazingly, the life of nobody else. Carpaccio's last thoughts had been on the porn. He was dead before he knew what hit him. It is worth noting that many people, in the days that followed, would muse that such an end was too merciful for Carpaccio.

And thus ended the three lives of the three greedy souls whose death Reggie had foreseen.

EXUPÉRY

Reggie simply could not resist sharing the Schadenfreude. He knew he should not be enjoying the deaths of these assorted evil souls so completely, but he could not help it. Which one would the professor find the most odious, he wondered, as he navigated the path that led from the road to the underpass encampment. Reggie found himself chuckling ghoulishly as he pictured the ghastly ends of Rhoda Embers, A.J., Carpaccio, and the Grifters. He ambled towards the professor's tent--then stopped in his tracks. He heard brokenhearted weeping.

Nobody else was around; everyone else was off having their day: panhandling, grifting, thieving, working for food. Noiselessly, Reggie crept towards the tent. The flaps were closed, but there was a small open sliver. Reggie peered in. The professor was studying a photo album, turning each page slowly, tenderly.

More crying, a couple of racking sobs.

Rattled by what he had seen and heard, Reggie retreated, headed back to his car, and left the professor alone to linger in his private grief.

When Reggie got back home, he ensconced himself in the safety of his bedroom. He hugged Hawking awkwardly but sincerely. And then he scrawled out a quotation and thumbtacked it up above the assorted Latin quotations that stared down on him as he slept:

“It is such a secret place, the land of tears.”

‘The Little Prince’ by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

CHAPTER SIXTEEN:
THE RESCUE

Reggie was lying in his bed, pondering the bizarre happenings of the last few days and weeks. The pair of doomed grifters haunted him more than any of the others: he simply couldn't let go of those images of Joe and DebOrah, thieving, conning, taking advantage of every unfortunate soul that crossed their path. Of course, Reggie himself was not the type of person to go out and commit vigilante justice, but he surprised himself at how much he celebrated their grisly deaths. Was this wrong, he pondered, given that he had been chosen to be the host to such an astonishing gift? Might this wreak dangerous karma on himself, or, God forbid, on those whose lives he could influence so profoundly, when he donned his Grim Reaper cloak? Or perhaps it was more a matter of--

And then his mind stopped racing. A thought interrupted his brain rant.

The dogs.

The dogs! Those poor caged dogs, trapped in those tiny wire cages in this sweltering summer heat. Were all of them stolen from frantic owners, as were the ones that Joe and DebOrah had taken to the dog farmer for money? Reggie even remembered seeing dead dogs in the cages, done in by the brutal temperature and probably not enough water. Removing the dead was obviously something that the dog farmer did not do with any regularity.

Reggie had to do something. A pet dog that he had once owned had been stolen some years ago; police had callously told him that because it was a small dog, and because of the gang activity in the area, it had probably been stolen for bait in a dogfight enterprise. That thought haunted Reggie, and it always would. But he could do something about this.

He knew it would seem creepy and stalkerish, given that it was three in the morning, but he felt he just couldn't wait another minute. Innocent canine lives were at stake. He dialed Sera's number.

And--why was Reggie even surprised?--she was fabulous about it.

"Of course you did right to call!" she blurted out, suddenly awake. "I'm getting dressed as we speak."

"Great. OK then. I'll pick you up in ten?"

Sera had worked it all out by the time Reggie got there.

"If this guy hoards dogs--puppy mill, dog farmer, whatever--then his main source of income is selling them for the meat. Gone are the days when people would pay top dollar for a breed or a designer dog. Most people are too poor and the laws are too cruel. But there's good money in blackmarket dog meat. So here's the plan, Reggie. You call and pose as a black market buyer--"

“--But I can't! He'd never believe me! That sounds dangerous--”

“Relax. You won't actually be meeting with him. You just have to be convincing on the phone. Tell him something private that you know about these Joe and DebOrah creeps, convince him that they told you to call. Tell him you want to make a big purchase, and you're willing to pay top dollar. These guys are always looking for new buyers, because buyers are always getting busted.”

“But what if I get busted?”

“Relax, Mr. Milquetoast You just talk to him on the phone long enough to get him to agree to a meeting place. He'd never let you come to the farm in case you are undercover, it's all more convoluted than that. Then, when he's away from his farm--we make the meeting place just far enough away that it will take him a while--that's when we swoop. By the time he realizes you stood him up, all his cages will be empty, and those poor dogs will be rescued!”

“Sera, you're a genius, have you done this kind of thing before?”

“Never mind that. Oh wait--damn! We need his phone number. These guys don't exactly advertise in the yellow webpages.”

“Aha! *That*, I can do! I just access Joe and DebOrah's cell phone accounts, which is easy-peasy, and then I find the area code that matches where the farm was. It wasn't urban, I can't imagine they have any other phone number with that area code stored in their phones.”

“Great! You start on that, I'll work my end of things, and hopefully, by this time tomorrow--”

Reggie grabbed her and kissed her. It was on the cheek, combined with an awkward hug. No woman could have been threatened by that.

Reggie would always remember the rescue as having three acts, like some piece of modern grand opera. The phone call was as easy as Sera had

promised it would be. Reggie was a better actor than he knew himself to be, and the guy was greedy. Probably high on something, too. The guy agreed to meet at a public place about a half hour away from the dog farm, so that bought Sera and her crew time.

And then, the pageant began in earnest. Since Reggie never did plan to meet with the monstrous man, he drove with Sera to the farm. They watched from a safe distance as the dog farmer drove his truck down the long dirt road, and headed off to his assignation with the mythical dog meat buyer. Then, they went to work, Reggie following her lead and more than a little mystified.

“Sera, my car isn’t big enough--”

“I keep telling you, Reggie. I got this.”

And as if on cue, the curtain opened on the first act of the opera.

In a grand and strange caravan they came, trundling down the country lane, then down the dirt road that led to the scene of the great drama. Reggie watched, amazed. There must have been two dozen cars, with a few trucks and vans thrown in. Reggie couldn’t help but notice that the dog he and Sera had rescued on the rainy night they first met was actually in the passenger seat of the lead truck, sporting a red bandana--and a cone for its stitches.

All in all, it was like a large land flotilla, and when they all parked and jumped out of their vehicles, they were like EMTs or triage experts. They hurried to the cages, some running inside the barn and some starting with the poor animals whose cages were stacked in the hot sun. It wasn’t even ten in the morning yet, but still the heat was blistering. You would have thought the whole scene had been meticulously rehearsed. A mere ten minutes had passed, and in that time, every dog and puppy, cats and a few kittens, some rabbits, and a family of ferrets had been removed from their rusty, rundown, jabbing

wire cages and placed in new, clean, plastic ones. The cages were loaded into the vehicles, and the caravan headed back out onto the main road, just as quickly and efficiently as they had arrived.

Sera watched them leave, proud and relieved.

“Ah. I can breathe. Thank God this evil monster didn’t have large animals. I was afraid there might be horses, goats and sheep, that sort of thing. We aren’t geared up for that. Not this fast, anyway.”

Reggie stared at the disappearing line of cars.

“Sera, that was amazing. How did you--”

“Never mind that now. We have to hurry. Those dogs need our help, and who knows when this creep will be back.”

Reggie nodded, getting in the car and starting the engine. Sera jumped in, and they were gone in a cloud of dust.

Then began act two of the drama. Within twenty minutes, they were back in the city and driving through its manufacturing fringes, Reggie driving and following Sera’s directions. They pulled up in front of a nondescript metal building, sitting in the middle of a dozen other warehouses. Reggie noticed a number of the cars from the caravan parked nearby. The instant he stopped the car, Sera jumped out and hurried inside, Reggie following.

When he stepped inside, he was amazed at the scene. There were a dozen deep sinks against the back wall, all of them already filled with dogs, water, and suds. In the center of the large work area were a dozen tables, and kind people soothed the animals by talking gently to them as the whir of razors created a quiet hum in the room. And off in the corner, a few seriously gifted cat-whisperers worked on bathing the skittish rescues. Reggie took it all in.

“Sera, this is amazing.”

“I know. I’m proud of these people. Never any warning, and they show up like a band of guardian angels.”

“But what--how--”

“There is a large and heroic underground group of folks who gear up for this sort of thing. They’re pretty amazing, don’t you think?”

“Yeah. But I’ve never heard of it.”

“That’s by design. Reggie, you know the laws about which animals a vet can save and the ones he’s bound by law to euthanize. ‘Waste of valuable medicines and resources.’ So says the law. And that’s just code for the government doesn’t give a crap about innocent animals. Code for the new order is just fine with dogmeat farms.”

“You’re right. So all of these people here are breaking the law?”

“Unfortunately. But that’s never stopped us before.”

“Well, your secret is safe with me.”

“I know it is, Reggie. But enough prattle. We have work to do.”

It took a few hours, but the transformation was amazing. Balls of matted fur became Poodles and Pomeranians and Papillons, Cockers and Collies, Shih Tzus and Shelties, Lhasas and Maltese. Creatures indiscernible through the dirt and dried blood became Beagles and Boxers, Pugs and Pulis, French Bulldogs and Bull Terriers.

Coats were trimmed and toenails were clipped and eyes were cleaned. Wounds were tended to, and vitamins administered. The parched were hydrated, all thanks to a trio of tireless veterinarians who worked through the night in that bleak warehouse filled with barking and dog kisses.

In a word, the creatures all became adoptable. If they didn’t win your heart completely as they stood trembling in cages back at the evil man’s farm,

they certainly did now. Heartbreakers, every one of them, who would soon find secret, safe homes, thanks to this brave band of rebels.

Reggie and Sera were both exhausted, but stopped on their way home at an ice cream parlor where they shared a giant banana split. And then, when he dropped her off at her place, he stood at the front door with her and stared into her eyes, watching the moonlight play on her wild, willful, sable curls. (And on her numbers.)

Then, after a long moment, they did not kiss.

And Reggie headed home.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:
NOAH'S ARK

It was after Reggie's heroic part in the dog rescue that Reggie's life changed forever. It changed because Sera was now a permanent fixture in it. Oh, she made damn sure that he understood that she was not romantically interested. Her heart belonged to her childhood sweetheart, and it forever would. She was very clear about that. But she had always been forced to navigate the choppy waters of her chosen profession alone; none of her socialite friends wanted any part of it.

This was largely because much of what she did was subrosa, if not outright illegal. The new government with its new, draconian laws, was very strict about *which* medicines could be used for *what* kind of animals in *what* state of health. Scary stuff.

But animal lovers, and many vets, ignored it. And Sera, as it turns out, was a part of all that.

And so while the part of Reggie's life that dealt with death and death and more death barrelled forward, he now had this other, secret part of his life.

And although it was strange, scary sometimes, even a little traumatizing, he would tell you that he had never been happier in his life.

Nothing had ever come close.

(That said, because this is a story about death, and not life, we will gloss over the extensive animal adventures of Sera and Reggie. But because death is very much about having lived, and the bittersweet nostalgia that inevitably comes with having to eventually give up on the whole proposition, we will include it in brief, nonetheless.)

She corralled him to come along, using the excuse that a strong male could be useful in these situations. And while she and Reggie both knew that he was not particularly strong, she was not beyond manipulating him with flattery, and he was not beyond accepting it. Her smile made him weak in the knees when she addressed him:

“I walk into all kinds of scenarios, actually. Because I’m just not sure what kind of medicine I want to practice. So I assist. And the reason they let me assist in all kinds of situations, even though I am not fully certified yet, quite frankly, is money. I donate. To everybody and everything when it comes to animal causes. I figure that's as good a way as any to spend my inheritance. So, they let me assist. And they let me let you assist. Reggie, you're going to love it. It's not like anything else.”

LION HEARTED

Their first trip was to the city zoo. In spite of the creepy New National Order, which derived its dictums from the New World Order, with its cruel

prioritization and allotment laws, the zoo was in beautiful shape, maintained as it was by a coterie of uber-wealthy who still cared very much about such things.

The medical emergency was a lion with a hairball. One does not think of kings of the (vanishing) jungle as having hairballs, but they are really just big cats, and so it happens. In this case, a gigantic, football shaped, four pound hairball.

“First, his handlers noticed that Richard was getting very lethargic,” Sera explained on the way to the zoo’s operating theater.

As they walked by the enclosures, Reggie stared at flamingos, kudus, civets, and dik-diks, so intrigued by it all that for the first time since he had known her, he was having trouble concentrating on what Sera was saying. Why had he not spent more time at the zoo? Why had he spent so much time immersed in the micro levels of existence? In physics, and not biology? Why not this larger majesty, with its rapidly diminishing magnificence? Everything that Sera was saying to him registered a few seconds late.

“Richard?” he asked absently.

“Yeah, the lion. It’s his name. You know, like Richard the Lionhearted.”

“Oh. Cool. I never think of anybody as reading history anymore.”

“Well I just love this big cat. He and I were babies together. Anyway, then he stopped eating. We were all really nervous. Lord knows the planet can't afford to lose any more lions. So, Richard got the whole works--an ultrasound, x-rays, scope with a camera jammed down his throat, poor thing. But today, they operate.”

Now, if I were to tell you that the operation was routine and went off without a hitch, you might find that a bit anticlimactic, but it was, and it did. It was, after all, just a hairball. Albeit a giant one. Reggie’s job was as they had

described it: helping to move the lion on the table and off the table, along with several other hirsute men. Sera, meanwhile, had one job and one job only: to hold the needle with more anesthetic, should, God forbid, the lion start to wake up.

But Richard did not wake prematurely, he slept like a baby through it all. And everyone shared a beer in the sunshine as they watched Richard recover in his luxurious yard. Then, when he was completely himself again, he was released back into the acreage beyond, to mingle with his cohorts. And as if to drive home the point that he was very much alive and well, Richard marked his turf with a generous spray of urine, and farted loudly several times.

As the crew guffawed and congratulated themselves, Reggie was relaxed enough and the day was perfect enough for him to just sit back and study the effect that Sera had on everyone around her as she held court, laughing and telling stories. Reggie smiled and sighed. Golly he had it bad.

C-SECTION

It was about two o'clock in the morning when Reggie got the call from Sera, saying they needed to go help deliver a baby. Emergency surgery. They drove along the road that led into the sanctuary and to the medical enclosure, their way lit only by the full moon. When they got to the cage, Reggie observed flood lights illuminating the scene. There was no active animal in the cage, but only a very large mound of motionless black fur. Reggie, having no experience in these matters, was given a simple task. It was his job, along with three other men, to lift the sedated gorilla onto a stretcher, and to carry that stretcher into the operating room.

“You need to move quickly because this drug is only designed to keep her out for a short while. We need her awake, to deliver the baby,” explained Sera.

Within fifteen minutes, the gorilla was in the operating room, and five minutes later, she was waking up from her groggy sleep, uncomfortable, and in pain, and ready to deliver.

“Eclampsia” was what he heard the doctor explaining to her assistants. The importance of this operation was not lost on Reggie, for while he felt a profound reverence for all life, all wild things, he knew that the western lowland gorilla was an extremely endangered species, and every birth mattered. There was a team of a dozen people in the operating room, each with an assigned job, and it was not long before the action commenced. Reggie watched with amazement as the obi gyn--who usually delivered Homosapien babies, in a hospital for humans-- delivered a four and a half pound baby gorilla.

It was Sera’s job to take charge of the infant. She cleaned it, wrapped it in a bright yellow blanket, and then began the crucial job of giving the baby oxygen. And even though the baby was in need of oxygen, that did not stop it from looking all around as it sucked on his fingers and grabbed at its toes. It seemed to Reggie very much like a human baby.

Reggie just stared at Sera, watching her work her soothing magic. It is hard to be in love with a woman and watch her taking care of a baby, any infant, without thinking-- well, you get the idea. An hour later, they were driving back to the city, a little overwhelmed at everything that had happened. They both said little, but smiled a lot.

“That was amazing,” said Reggie, his penchant for saying the obvious glaring under the moonlight.

“Yeah. It was.”

“Do we know what the little guy’s name is?”

“Darwin.”

“Of course,” chuckled Reggie. “Of course that’s its name. Did I have to ask?”

And there were more adventures. They assisted in the operation on a White Rhino with a cancerous horn, and returned to her zoo home often, to visit her in her recovery. They would both watch in delight as she took moist and deep pleasure rolling around in the mud. Reggie had decided that the only thing more fun than watching the animals at play and in such a state of joy was watching Sera watch them.

And making journeys to find animals in need was not outside of Sera’s wheelhouse.

Of particular fascination to Reggie was the trip to the farm in Colorado, where they both watched a 3D printer patiently recreating the hoof of a miniature pony whose leg had been mangled by an attacking coyote.

“Shine’s a very lucky little horse,” explained Sera at the end of a John Denveresque weekend in the Rockies, watching the wee equine adapt to its new high tech appendage. “Larger horses are too heavy for 3D prosthetics, they still have to be put down for an injury as bad as Shine had. Maybe in the future, though. . .”

And with these words, Reggie died a little inside, knowing that Sera most probably did not have any future, and he didn’t know how to come back from this feeling of drowning in his own grief. It was a deep, dark ocean, sucking him relentlessly, mercilessly, down to the shadowless depths.

RACIN' BACON

It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon at the fair. Reggie struggled to keep up with Sera, who looked all grown up, carrying a regular black doctor's bag.

"What's the emergency?" asked Reggie.

"No emergency. This is a well-being call. And some massages."

A gunshot made Reggie flinch and scream. Sera rolled her eyes.

"Relax," she said. "It's just a starter pistol."

Reggie looked over at the small track in front of a large tent and saw a group of piglets racing their little hearts out as they rounded the curve together.

"They do it for the Oreo at the end," said Sera dryly. "Go figure. Oreos."

They could hear the announcer in the background.

"It's Tammy Swinette in the lead, but Roy Oinkheart is coming up behind her fast, Hamlet is third, Sir Francis Bacon is fourth, with Spamela Anderson and Shaquille O'Squeal bringing up the rear."

Reggie stopped and looked at Sera. Sera shrugged her shoulders.

"Roy Johnson. This is his deal. He takes his pig racing gig around to state fairs. He claims the pigs love it. I kind of hate him. But we have a sort of deal. I don't lecture him, and he lets me do welfare checks. Plus I give the pigs massages after they race."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. And guess what part needs the most massaging."

"No way--"

"No, not that. The pigs' 'ham' string."

An hour later, the therapy was done, and Sera was packing up her things. Reggie had taken a few quick minutes to sneak out of the tent and watch one of the pig races for himself. He had never seen one before, and he couldn't believe how funny it all was. Sera made her unhappiness at his pleasure known by her stony silence, and it was the closest they had ever come to a fight so far. But Roy and Reggie, between the two of them, managed to have her chuckling by the time she was ready to leave. She looked around at the little pigs happily eating their dinner. They seemed chipper and healthy enough, she mused to herself. And Roy seemed to really love these pigs. She noticed that he treated them the way that many people treat their dogs, with love and attention, gentle touching, conversation, and treats. She stopped before leaving the tent. She studied the pigs and then looked at Roy.

“You really do care for them, don't you, Roy?”

“Sera, they're like my kids. They *are* my kids.”

“Roy, those guys up for the next race. What are their names, dare I ask?”
Sera said, wincing even as she spoke the words.

“Well, that's Hogwarts, Harry Plopper, next to him is Chewbacon, Ham Solo, and that spotted one is Albert Einswine.

“And those three?”

“That's Frank and Chris. And the shy one is Barbie.”

Sera eyed Roy suspiciously.

“But Roy, those names are so . . . *normal*.

“Their full names are Frank Furter and Chris P. Bacon. And the shy one is Barbie Q.

Sera glowered at Roy.

“I really hate you, Roy, you know that?”

She glanced over at Reggie.

“Reggie, C’mon, we’re leaving.”

And they did. As they trudged to the car in the massive parking lot on the edge of the fair, they could hear Roy calling out the next race.

“HEY PIGGY PIGGY PIGGY PIGGY PIGGY...LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THEY ARE LINED UP AT THE STARTING GATE, AND WE ARE READY TO BEGIN, SO FINISH PLACING YOUR BETS!”

Sera just rolled her eyes and trudged towards her car, Reggie following.

THE JAVA JACKET

The next emergency did not come until six days later. Six whole days, without Reggie laying eyes on his beloved.

Reggie and Sera stared inside the cage at the sleeping, drugged animal.

“We need something,” said Sera. “He’s going to chew those stitches right out. And then, he won’t last the night.”

“I know. I was thinking that very thing,” said Reggie. “The surgeon did a great job, but I don’t think he really thought it through. Post-op, and all.”

“He probably had his mind on his daughter. He said he doesn’t usually do operations like this, but he did it for her, she was so upset. Terrified that the poor creature might die. But clearly, a procedure like this isn’t exactly routine.” said Sera.

“A tumor isn’t routine?” asked Reggie.

“You know what I mean, Reg,” she said, rolling her eyes at him and then looking again at the patient with deepening concern.

“Hey, Sera, I have an idea,” said Reggie. “Get me your Java Jacket.”

“What?” said Sera.

“Your Java Jacket.”

“What the heck is a java jacket?”

That little brown cardboard sleeve on your coffee cup that keeps you from burning yourself on the cup.”

“Those things have a name?”

“Of course. It’s a trademark. I thought everybody knew what they were called. Give me yours from your cup.”

A mystified Sera obeyed. Reggie produced a small pair of scissors and a tiny tube of Super Glue that he carried in his backpack.

“You carry Super Glue with you?”

“Sure, doesn't everybody?”

Reggie said nothing else, but worked meticulously for a few moments, then gingerly opened the cage and reached out gently to the patient.

“I hope I don't scare it. You think it bites?” he asked nervously.

“Do you think it matters if it bites?” she said, smirking.

Reggie fidgeted and muttered, while Sera uttered soothing words. They both stepped back and studied the patient.

Teddy Bear the Hamster stared back at them, bristling only a little bit at its new Java Jacket protective neck cone, but sensing that his caregiving team had only the best of intentions.

A minute later, a little girl burst into the room and hugged Reggie and Sera both at once, squishing them closer together as she did so.

“Oh thank you, Miss Sera! Teddy looks a lot happier!”

Sera smiled and tousled the little girl’s hair. Reggie watched the two of them together, and had thoughts. Sera would probably make a great mom.

Throughout this entire bizarre Noah's Ark type non-courtship, it is worth noting that Reggie and Sera got along famously. There was only one big blow-up between them, and that was when Reggie dared bring up the subject of Sera's engagement:

It was a beautiful day in the city.

They sucked and licked frozen strawberry pops from an ice cream truck. Sera noted that Reggie had an odd look on his face.

"Don't you like yours?" she asked.

"Well, frankly, it reminds me too much of a urinal mint."

She laughed and snorted, caught off guard.

"Now you ruined mine for me!"

Their laughter faded with the fading light of day. She studied him. He was studying the rock on the fourth finger of her left hand.

"You're staring at my ring."

"Yeah. I just couldn't help but wonder when--"

"Oh criminy, if I had a dollar for every time I heard that!"

"You don't need a dollar. Your fiancé is a billionaire. And you inherited some money when your parents--sorry. I guess that's depressing for you to talk about."

"Maybe we should change the subject."

Reggie said nothing, his stoney silence worse than his cross-examination. She scowled at him.

"Look, Buzz and I are getting married, OK? Absolutely. There's just been all these extenuating circumstances."

"Extenuating circumstances?"

“Yeah. Why are you laughing?”

“Well, it’s just that you are one hell of a woman. You don’t strike me as the kind of female to allow extenuating circumstances to interfere with her love life.”

“Reggie, if you knew what happened--”

“I *do* know what happened. I remember because it made headlines. Your mother-in-law-to-be was getting some kind of butt procedure from some very fancy but very unlicensed plastic surgeon who gave parties in the penthouse of you-know-who’s building in midtown, and she--the procedure--”

Reggie could no longer get the words out through his cackling.

“Stop it. There was nothing funny about it.”

“And the stuff he injected into her butt suddenly expanded too much, then deflated instantaneously. Damn, Sera, you know that video went viral. She was practically flying around the room like a balloon some one let rip.”

More cackling. Sera scowled.

“It was not funny. It was very traumatic for her.”

She stared at him. He just kept laughing. And then, her façade cracked. Her upper lip trembled. She giggled.

“OK, well maybe it was just a *little* bit funny. That is, after everybody knew she was going to be OK, of course. After that.”

“It was very hilarious. From the beginning. The whole thing.”

“Whatever.”

“But Sera, that was six years ago. You were a kid. You’ve been wearing that ring through more than one presidential administration.”

“Well, Buzz and I were childhood sweethearts. And then there was his poor dad--”

“Yeah, yeah. A couple of years--years, Sera--went by, and you had it all rescheduled.”

“A heart attack, for Pete's sake, Reggie. You aren't going to tell me that you gossip mongers thought that was funny.”

“Of course not. Convenient that his father had it on the eve of the wedding.”

“Go to hell, Reggie! He did not stage that heart attack.”

“Of course not. Why would he stage a heart attack to keep his rich trust fund kid from marrying the city's favorite trust fund hippie? Whose parents produced political satire musicals, no less?”

“Keep this up, I am getting up and walking away.”

“And didn't it turn out that it wasn't a heart attack at all, it was GERD.”

“What?”

“Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease. Esophageal Spasm. Really bad indigestion?”

“Reggie, I don't think I've ever seen this side of you before. And I don't like it.”

“And then there was the third go at it.”

“Don't go there. Don't go there, Reggie.”

“Buzz McClain was arrested. Richie Rich got led away to the pokey for crimes against--”

“Hey, that was never supposed to happen to all those ostriches. The plan was for them to be back at the pet-a-pet by dawn.”

“Oh, the humanity. Oh fowl, fowl death!”

“Hey, he wrote a big check that more than covered it.”

“I guess money can buy anything.”

“And he did twenty whole hours of community service.”

“Yes, I remember, the world watched breathlessly . . . And then, Sera, there was the time you canceled the big day.”

“I got the shingles.”

“And you’ve never reset the date.”

“I’m waiting for the scars to fade. Everyday, oi, with the vitamin e oil.”

“Chicken.”

“You think I’m going to show up in an off the shoulder five thousand dollar Vera Wang gown with scab scars all over me?”

Reggie paused his relentless attack for a moment. He gazed at her adoringly.

“Cripes, Sera. If you want to marry someone, you just marry them. You don’t worry about scars and ostriches and all that crap. Not with true romance.”

“Oh, right, and you are some big expert in true romance. That’s funny.”

Reggie swallowed hard, stared at Sera.

“And that’s cruel.”

“That’s not--I didn’t mean--look, Reggie. You are a great guy, a really great guy. Hey, maybe if I had met you first, we’d be the ones getting married.”

“And that was even crueler. Don’t patronize me.”

“I didn’t--I wasn’t--”

“Hey Sera, I’ll meet you Saturday at the place. But I think I better go. And all I meant was, you know, about you and Buzz--well, forget it. You know what I was getting at. Goodbye, Sera.”

And he trudged off dejectedly into the night.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN:
FIBONACCI

THE PRECINCT. WEE HOURS OF THE MORNING.

“Explain to me again exactly why I am here, professor? Why the hell am I at the police station at bat’s ass three in the goddamn morning, bailing you out for assault?”

It was a rare display of temper from Reggie. Only an hour ago, he had been sound asleep in his bed, having drifted off well before midnight to the affable sound of Hawking snoring.

He strode ahead of the professor, his body sweating from the sheer emotion of it. Reggie gestured wildly as he bellowed, oblivious to the uniformed officers who jerked their heads up from paperwork and computer screens.

“Cripes, professor, whatever happened to your brag that you had zero criminal record, and all that peace love crap and ten commandments and love your neighbor and golden rule crap.

“Justice is mine, sayeth the Lord!” announced the professor, unphased. “This was an exception to that ‘peace love crap’. I was looking for a lighter because mine was out of juice and I walk into this tent and see this kid, this poor boy, this ‘tween, man, giving old Joe a blowjob. That’s just wrong, man. No doubt this kid is some desperate runaway.”

All of this had stopped Reggie in his tracks. He turned and stared at the professor.

“Oh. Well. That’s different. I guess. It’s just that—you aren’t a guy who goes looking for trouble. I’ve always been secretly impressed at how you live down there . . . you know, all those months, living under Bowden’s Bridge at that awful encampment—”

“Are you insulting my home? And my neighborhood?”

Reggie heard the old sass return to the professor’s voice, and he poked his finger into the professor’s chest.

“Do not start with me. DO NOT START! And what about the charges? You may have to go to court, they could convict you, and then they could—”

But Reggie’s rant was interrupted by a police officer who appeared out of nowhere—the bathroom, actually, but it seemed as though he had appeared out of thin air. The policeman put his hand on Reggie’s shoulder in a calming gesture, studying Reggie, who looked terrified, as though he had been caught doing something illegal.

“Hey kid—Reggie, that’s your name? I overheard while you were doing the paperwork. Look, I wouldn’t worry about charges or court or nothin’. Everybody thinks your friend is a goddamn hero. Everybody in this precinct would have done exactly what your friend did, if they didn’t think it might cost them their badge. That old Joe is a real dirtbag. I could tell you stories. . .”

Reggie seemed to be calming down. The policeman grinned at him, a genuine smile.

“Pal, get out of here. You and your friend go get some food, and some sleep.”

Reggie, nobody’s fool, complied.

But sleep was not to come. The professor dozed off, no problem. A quick snort from a small flask of the cheapest whiskey money could buy helped. But Reggie, who was sitting beside the professor in the tent he called home, was restless. But he could not bring himself to leave. Too much had happened, and the consequences could have been far too grim.

Suddenly, unpremeditated, Reggie jabbed the professor awake. The professor sat up quickly, his instincts honed to react to any disruptions in the encampment routine that happened under Bowden’s Bridge.

“What? WHAT?” The professor’s eyes darted all around. Reggie sighed deeply, studying his friend.

“The thing is, Professor, you seem to be forgetting how this could have gone down. I mean yeah, that cop was cool about it, and he’s probably right, nothing will come of it all. Let’s face it, the cops, and almost everybody else, just don’t give a crap what happens to homeless folks these days. Everybody’s trying hard enough to survive, they can’t be worried about a tent city. But that’s the whole point, Professor. You know what tends to happen to homeless people who draw attention to themselves. Who make any kind of trouble at all, for that matter . . .”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. The cops kind of . . .disappear them.”

“Exactly, professor, and that’s if some citizen vigilante doesn’t burn you up like a crispy critter first.”

The professor sat up.

“Kid, why don’t you go home. I’m sorry I dragged you into this.”

But Reggie just shook his head ‘no’, a fire in his eyes that the professor had not seen before.”

“I’m serious, kid. Go home.”

Reggie crossed his arms, staring at the professor. They were both quiet for a long moment. But finally, the questions that had been building up for years burst out of Reggie.

“Look, Professor. I consider you a friend. My best friend, for that matter. My only friend, if truth be told. But I am not going to let you get away with dodging my questions. You’re the smartest person I know, for Pete’s sake, and you live here, like this?”

And for the first time ever, in the long and repeating cycle of seasons that they had spent communing under this bridge, the professor turned on the kid. It was subtle enough, but it did not go unnoticed by Reggie. The professor flashed a cavalier smile.

“I am a sucker for the great outdoors.”

“Not good enough.”

“Not your business.”

“It is my business, because I’m your friend.”

“You’re crossing a line, kid.”

“You crossed a big line when you decided to take up living out here. I can say that because I know the life you had before. Look, all I know is that three years ago, I was going into the city library when you were coming out, and I wasn’t paying attention and I ran right into you, and you were carrying that weird thing with the motor and the glass and the wingie looking things, and it fell on the pavement and broke, so you let me buy you dinner to make up for it. And I spent my whole damn cheeseburger trying to figure where I had seen you. That’s when I realized that I’d seen you in pictures with my dad. Pictures

from that big symposium. I remember asking my dad about you, something about the way you two were laughing and sparring in those pictures. And dad said that he met you there, at that big international science conference deal, and that you had some really wacky ideas, that the world was only six thousand years old and that you stood up and gave some big speech about how Genesis was totally true and that all the animals were created on the fifth day--"

"--sixth day--" the professor said, interrupting with amazing calm and aplomb.

"--Oh, whatever. My point is--"

"Actually, it was the fifth and the sixth, that's why people often argue one or the other. Birds and fishes, fifth. Landrovers, sixth. So why didn't he create them all in one day, it begs the question?"

Reggie exploded at the professor.

"*That?* THAT is the fucking question it begs? No sir, the question it begs is how could the smartest man that I have ever met, outside of my dad, possibly believe--"

"Hey kid, I never heard you use the word 'fucking' before. Wow."

"Yeah, well there's a lot of words I've been using lately that I never used before. And 'gift' or 'prophet' or 'Nostradamus' isn't fucking one of them."

"Calm down kid. Remind me about the pictures of me and your dad. I'd forgotten. . ."

Reggie took a deep breath and tried to calm down.

"Well. Uhm. Anyway, my dad said that you were the smartest Creationist he'd ever heard. You actually made all that sound believable. Or so dad said. But then, he said that after you had a few drinks with him at the bar, he could have sworn that you were starting to--how shall we say? Recant? Doubt yourself? The whole Creationist thing. But then again, dad said that you were pretty drunk, so he wasn't sure. Anyway, he said that the next day,

you were back to your professional, evangelical self. That was, what, six years ago? A lifetime ago? And now you are here. Living here--"

--and that was when Reggie noticed a raggedy band of homeless, like extras from Les Miz, leaning in to finally get an earful of the mysterious man's story.

"--and that's the damn backstory for all you interlopers!" Reggie snapped. They backed off.

The professor rolled his eyes and chuckled.

"Kid, I think maybe we ought to call it a day."

"No. Not until you tell me everything."

Hostility again. Cold silence.

"Why should I?"

"Because my parents are dead and my brother is dead, and you're the only family I have. So spill."

The professor stared at him long and hard. He realized that Reggie wasn't going anywhere.

"Oh, kid. It's quite a story, how I got here. You see, I'm from a kind of a dynasty . . ."

As the professor talks, the afternoon sky clouds over, creating a premature feeling of dusk encroaching. Reggie sits spellbound as the long story of the professor's unknown history spills out.

" . . . So you see, kid, we're talking my father, and my grandfather, and my great grandfather, they were all devout followers. All parts of the machine. Did I really have a chance to live a different kind of life? Not if you realize that smart people can be brainwashed just as easily and thoroughly as folks who aren't so smart."

“Yes, Professor, but *Liberty University*? *You*, at Liberty?”

“Let me talk, kid. So of course, then, like any good Liberty family, we started our brood. I had my boy. My son. Joan had nothing but miscarriages after that, we never really understood why, so he was our only child. He was our whole world. He was smart, from the very beginning. Learned everything, picked up on things months or years before he was supposed to. But sometimes he was a bit too curious, if you know what I mean. He found my stash--not porn. Not porn. Evolution based science books. And some of the biggies--our arch enemies, at Liberty. Names like Ernst Mayr, Stephen Gould, Dawkins, Hawking, of course . . . this kid was amazing. You know what cracked me up about this kid? His Halloween costumes. It was kind of a thing in our circles, you know, the church women’s clubs and such, to make your kid’s Halloween costume, not to buy them in stores. That’s for pagans. Trust me, the Christians are taking Halloween back. Censoring the whole Samhain story, rewriting and controlling the narrative. But I’m rambling. Anyway, my kid, what a character, with the costumes! Oh, the characters he would think up to be. Spartacus. Braveheart. Emperor Joshua Norton. Sitting Bull. Once, he wanted to be John Brown. You know, the slave rebellion guy. He was a little disappointed that the costume for John Brown was so nondescript, so he arranged for his little cousins to go along with him in blackface. Christ, what blowback we got on that. I guess I didn’t really get it at the time. God, what an asshole I was. The last year he went trick-or-treating, hmm, I think he was thirteen, anyway, he had gotten all obsessed with Guy Fawkes. Guy Fawkes? See what I mean, what a weird, wonderful kid. Anyway, he dressed up like Guy Fawkes, he had a whole set of sparklers and little fireworks and everything, and he keeps yelling ‘A PENNY FOR THE OLD GUY.’ Ha!”

“T.S. Eliot? The Hollow Men?”

“Yes. My kid even celebrates Guy Fawkes day every November 5th.”

The professor chuckled as he pictured this memory in his mind. Then, his smile faded and his eyes grew dark, seeming to change colors.

“Then, the day came that changed everything. I can’t believe I didn’t see it coming. I guess I was so wrapped up in my own life that I didn’t see the signs. . . anyway, my son, my boy, comes home one day, and he tells his ma and me that he was gay. Said he had already come out to a bunch of his friends, and he figured he ought to tell us before we heard it from someone else. And I don’t know, Reggie, I--”

The professor stopped talking and looked down. His body began to tremble. And then, his voice shaking, he continued.

“I hit my kid. I hit him hard. I don’t--it’s hard to recall, I swear I’ve blocked it out--but I don’t think I used my fist, I don’t think I socked him. I don’t think I could do that to my kid, but I slapped him so damn hard that he fell backward and he went hurtling to the floor. He had a small cut on the back of his head, a little blood, it didn’t seem deep. And then, I know I can’t believe I’m saying this, I left him. I just left him. I mean, I told my wife to call an ambulance if she thought she needed to, but I knew that I just had to talk to the Reverend. I had to get his advice about what to do. So, I go to the Reverend’s house, it’s late in the evening, and I tell him it’s an emergency. And we talk. Came up with some ideas. Prayer circle, therapy, that kind of thing. We agreed to talk the next day. So I left. . .”

The professor trailed off for a few seconds, in another world. Then he came back to this one, of his own accord.

“When I got home, my son was already gone. ”

“He’d run away?” Reggie asked, his eyes wide.

“No. Worse. Worse than that. Can you believe that my wife had already made arrangements to have him picked up?”

“Picked up?”

“Yeah, by one of those wacky evangelicals that runs one of those shadowy, off the radar gay conversion camps.”

“Oh Christ, Professor.”

“Trust me on this one, Christ had nothing to do with it. Of course, I got right on it. First, I tried to find out where he was, where the place was. My wife wouldn't tell me. Turns out she couldn't tell me, that was a condition of them taking him, is that nobody can know the location. No contact with family, no telephone, no email, no texting, no visits, and no knowing where your kid is. That's the only way it works, they told my wife-- actually, I had heard this too myself, before the whole damn thing got so personal. Regardless, that was basically the night my marriage ended. I couldn't believe she would do that without consulting me. We had the biggest screaming match we'd ever had. Cops even came, but they were members of our church so they didn't stay long. Anyway, I started researching it, spent the next few days finding out everything I could about this creepy conversion place. And at first it wasn't so bad. Just like we would have planned for him. Prayer circles. Therapy. Exercise. Group sharing. More prayer. Lots of Bible referencing. But then, I started to hear rumors. And then I started to realize that they weren't rumors at all, but the truth about what really was going on there. Reggie, kid, it was horrible. It was nothing less than torture.”

Finally, the professor broke down. He hid his face away, making odd snuffling sounds. Then he rallied, and looked up again, staring at Reggie.

“I knew from people I could believe that there were beatings and kids being put in isolation rooms, little cells, naked or in their underwear, for weeks at a time. And I found out later that there was other torture. Kids forced to jam their hands into buckets of ice water, for hours. Kids given electric shocks

through their bodies, while looking at pictures of naked men. And here's the killer: there was no oversight, no regulations, no licenses necessary, no inspections, no way to report shit to the authorities--and all because it was done through the church. Protected by the church."

The professor took out his cellphone. It was one of the few civilized luxuries he allowed himself. He hit a button, and he began to play a snippet from a video, handing the phone to Reggie as he did.

"This kid here," said the professor. "He escaped. Everytime I watch it, I get physically ill. But I can't not watch it. I got to find my kid. And I got to fix my brain, kid. FUCK, MAN! I gotta fix my brain!"

Reggie stared at the little screen, hypnotized by the young man talking to the interviewer.

“. . .They took me into the office, Knott pulled out a 38 automatic pistol, and told me that since I wanted to commit suicide, I should put the gun in my mouth and pull the trigger. It was routine for Knott to wake all the boys up in the middle of the night, and make them work out. Sometimes for hours. Jumping jacks, push-ups, running around in a circle outside in the rain, didn't matter if they were sick. And then, after he'd been drinking a while, he'd make a couple of kids fight each other. Till they were bloody pulps. Hell, they used to do that to our soldiers in Bataan. Sometimes they had to do all this naked. And if anyone resisted, he would punch them, choke them, body slam them. And then, of course, the solitary confinement. Some kids who really tried to resist were shackled by the ankles, hung upside down, and beaten with a belt. He had names for his belts and whips. Names: Judy. SugarMama. . .”

When the screen went black, the professor continued his story:

"I'll never forget this. It was about three weeks after I'd lost him, and I went to the church. It was late at night, nobody was there, but I had keys. I went to the altar and I got on my knees. And then, it was so weird. If I didn't

know better, I'd have thought I was on mushrooms. All the faces of the statues and paintings changed. Mary was scowling and the apostles were grimacing and the statue of Christ--I was prostrate below it, get me?--and it seemed to be looking at me with such rage and pain. I know it was all in my mind, but at one point, I swear to God that Christ was weeping. Actual tears. I know, it's all crap. I'm crazy. I've just plain lost my mind."

"No you haven't, Professor. You've *lost your son*. But you are the smartest man I know, and I'm no jughead. Between us, I bet we can find him."

"Dammit, kid, you don't think I've tried? Here's how it came down. After that crazy night at the church, I never went home again. I got my own place. And then, something happened. Apparently, a kid was able to run away from the camp, the same camp my kid was in, and he made it his mission to contact as many parents as he could. The place even got shut down about six months later. But by then, my kid was long gone. The kid who'd run away said that my son always swore that if he got out, he'd head for either Seattle or Portland. You know, they have those underground communities and such for gays. Cripes, I don't need to tell you what would mean for my son if he tried to live his life as a gay man these days, in most places. He certainly couldn't do it back in his old neighborhood. I mean, it's not like they'd throw him off the roof of a tall building, like they do in some countries. But you know, ever since the Seventeen Mandates--well, I don't have to tell you. God, I hate our fucking Emperor. Excuse me, "The President Rex". I can still remember when we could vote for our leaders. But, I ramble. Anyway, the next thing I did was cash in all my money and I paid a bunch of the best in the business to go to Seattle and Portland, looking for him."

"That's great, Professor. But why didn't you go yourself? And that still doesn't explain why--"

“Look, kid, I guess I didn’t mention this, but my son told me, that night--the night I slugged him . . .there he was, lying on the floor in a pile of his smashed Star Wars memorabilia, and he told me he was leaving home forever. This was before he knew he’d be dragged from home, by the way. And he told me that if I came looking for him, he’d either kill me, or kill himself. So now, you see. . .”

Reggie nodded solemnly. The professor rambled on.

“Anyway, I have had a few leads. But you know how it is when strangers get shown pictures, there’s always people who chime in, trying to help, saying they’ve seen him. Got that from both cities. So we are still looking. Sometimes we get close. One sent a picture he managed to get, but it was dark, and the kid was running. In the meantime, my boy is out there. Somewhere out there. Alone, afraid. Cold. Hungry. And, uhm, see, I figure, if he has to be out there homeless, on the streets, without a roof over his head--”

Suddenly, Reggie had an epiphany. Suddenly it all made sense.

“--Then you do too. Is that it, professor?”

“Yeah kid. Now you got it.”

“But Professor, what if he has a change of heart? It could happen! What if he shows up at your place and you’re not there?”

“Everything he needs is there and a note is already there. Oh, and he knows the address. He called his mother from a payphone, and she actually gave it to him. But he wouldn’t come home to her. He was barely talking to her.”

“And if he does show up at your place?”

“He knows how to get in. He’s got the code.”

“OK. But in the meantime, shouldn’t I check on things for you? You’re gonna tell me the code or what?”

“Kid, if you can’t figure it out, you don’t deserve to know it.”

The professor pulled out his pocket watch and studied it.

“I told him that he would get this on his sixteenth birthday. That’s how old I was when my dad gave it to me, and his dad before that.”

“He’ll come back, Professor. I promise.”

The conversation faded into silence.

And through the rest of the sunset, they sat in silence.

POSTSCRIPT: Oh, and for those of you who are wondering. When Reggie did go to the professor’s apartment a few days later, the first thing he typed into the security pad was the Fibonacci Sequence, and of course it got him in. Although Reggie did observe wryly that he had to type into the pad Fib’s sequence numbers going all the way up to 10946. Reggie just shook his head. This little trick would have required that the professor override the basic electronic template of the security pad. But it was apparently important to the professor. The professor. Go figure.

CHAPTER NINETEEN:
THE TRUTH OF THE MIRRORS

Two more.

Just two more stories.

It's all I ask, that you indulge me.

I know full well that we are barrelling headlong towards the end of the book—and towards one, final manifestation of the milk carton. (*“If somebody found out they were going to die, and then did a really noble thing, could they avoid their own Date with Death?”* I have been asked. *“Sera is a good person, can't the Grim Reaper spare her?”* is another thin reed that was offered. Cripes, I'm thinking, have you not been paying attention?)

And yes, you have already heard some stories. But those sad souls from Angel Acres had already learned of their impending deaths long before Reggie

entered the picture, and they had resigned themselves to living out their last days in the hospice. Reggie's revelations offered them power, not dread. Puissance, not petrification. Or in the case of the rogue's gallery, whose dreadful biographies you have already read: their deaths were events which, if not celebrated outright, surely did not cause anybody to lose any sleep.

Actually, it would be the Professor who is being indulged. Once, when all of the sadness had passed, and his life had moved on, he and I were drinking a bottle of very fine scotch. . . (it is worth noting that the Professor's taste drastically improved with his improved circumstances) . . . anyway, apart from the hospice stories and the horrible five, whose death I, for one, relished recounting, these two stories that follow—the stories of Lucy and Rose—these were the Professor's favorite stories.

As for good old Reggie, poor old Reggie, I am not sure he actually had any "favorites", he just didn't see it all that way, although there were some deaths that he and Russell discussed late into the night, and into the wee hours. But that is definitely a story for another time.

(It is worth pointing out that there are many stories that did not make it into this tome—although who's to say there won't be more published accounts? Now there were those, understandably, who considered the details of their dying to be a private experience. Furthermore, I can state unequivocally that as of this writing, any Youtube accounts of so-called "mystical" deaths following Reggie's grim but accurate predictions are fake, mercenary, and predatory upon those poor humans who constantly seek comfort regarding/escape from their inevitable shuffling off of this mortal coil. Point is, in this regard: you can't not shuffle. Isn't an option.)

That said.

When Lucy Bingham learned from Reggie that she was going to die in one year--and of course, as we have explained, this was after she had been shown all the powerfully convincing and terrifying proofs--she did what so many reasonable and marginally vain women would do. She dashed to the local mall to get a grand and pricey makeover.

It is worth pointing out that Lucy was not a particularly self-absorbed woman. She was only interested in her appearance to the same degree as other harried mothers who are only infrequently allowed that luxury. In point of fact, that truth about Lucy--that she was such a good mother--was most probably the reason for this mad dash to Macy's.

You see, the first flush of words and feelings conveyed by Lucy to Reggie was heartbreak over what this would do to her family. She could not even focus on the impact that the revelation of her own impending death was having on her own head and heart, rather she alternated between thoughts of breaking her dear husband's heart, and the reality of essentially abandoning her children. Lucy explained to Reggie that after she heard the news from him and saw the irrefutable proof, she was terrified of returning home because of how she would behave.

First, she would have to decide *if* she would tell them--and if so, both her husband and her kids, or just her husband? Either way, she figured, her revelation would sound basically insane. And she feared that her behavior might be a little crazy as well. (Keep in mind that Reggie could not tell you how you were going to die.) In her brain, she vacillated between hysteria and rage and terror. Of course, her family would pick up on that; her hysteria and rage and terror would become theirs, and she just could not face the reality of doing that to them. Not just yet.

So. Macy's. For a fancy makeover.

And that is all the background you need.

Lucy sashayed up to the cosmetics counter with a winning smile. You never would have guessed what was going on in her brain at that moment. A dazzling woman with red hair breezed around the counter to greet Lucy and get her seated. Wordlessly, she offered Lucy a glass of white wine. Odd, Lucy thought. Usually, they asked first, did you want any wine? This woman had just handed it to her.

“I’m Ariel, dear. And I’m the best. And you are . . . ?”

“Terrified.”

Lucy said it without realizing what she was saying, and the odd comment seemed to go unnoticed by this stranger. The ginger studied Lucy a moment, then started in with great earnest.

“First, I am going to apply a light astringent all over your face, to remove the old makeup.”

“Of course.”

“And then, a special pad across the eyes, to get rid of the mascara. That is one of the biggest causes of the short term appearance of bags, as well as long term damage to the skin under the eyes, the improper removal of mascara, did you know?”

“Oh. Mmhm.”

“Drink your wine. It’s a wonderful Yalumba.”

“Oh. Lovely.”

“Now, to your colors. I look at you and I see a nice vintage rose. Not red, too heavy. Not too pinky. Rose. Call it dusty rose, Victorian rose.”

“Rose it is,” Lucy agreed, as Ariel poured her more wine.

“And then we will talk about how your passing will actually bring you closer to your children.”

Lucy stopped mid-gulp.

Ariel started humming as she stroked Lucy’s cheeks with the cotton ball.

“P-p-pardon?” Lucy sputtered.

“Close your eyes, please. I’m applying the mascara remover.”

“What did you--”

“You’ve gotten horrible news. We all know that--”

“Wait, who’s ‘we’?”

“And what you fear--right now--is correct. There is no getting out of this. I know that’s hell to hear. And I know that it seems like an awfully raw deal, right about now.”

“But how do you know--”

“Look, I’m going to go with a foundation just slightly darker than your skin tone, because I can see that you do a little tanning bed and spray tan, I think a bit of bronze will even things up, yes?”

(And suddenly, for reasons nobody will ever know, this seemed to Lucy like the most natural question in the world. Which of course it would have been, had the other comments not transpired. But even in spite of this stranger’s other mystical utterances, the question about foundation seemed perfectly normal. It all ran together, Angela’s running commentary, even as it ebbed and flowed. And somehow, for reasons Lucy would never understand, but always cherish, it all made a strange kind of sense.)

“Yes,” said Lucy, smiling dreamily as she sipped the wine. “I do like to keep a little color year round. My husband likes me that way too.”

And then, this unexpected thought of her dear Walter made tears well up in her eyes. Ariel patted her shoulders.

“Go ahead, dear. Have a good cry. But you’re not leaving your husband. You’re just changing the way that you’ll be with him.”

Lucy stared at Ariel.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“What it means, is that now, you see him after eight at night, when he’s half asleep, and a little on the weekends, right?”

“Uhm, yes--”

“--but now, you’ll be around him all the time. I mean, if you want to. Personally, I can’t imagine it. And trust me dear, I can imagine a great deal.”

It had taken about three minutes, but now Lucy was, to coin some slang, freaked out. She yanked off the large gray plastic salon cape that covered her clothes and jumped up from her chair too quickly, spilling the wine.

“What is this? What sadistic fool put you up to this? Did Reggie send you?”

“Well, to answer that question--”

“And Reggie seemed so nice!”

“Reggie *is* so nice, and I suppose the best way to explain it is not that he sent me, as much as it is that *we* sent *him*.”

“I’m asking you again, who the hell is ‘we’?”

“Oh, I think that will become obvious enough. It’s just hard to explain it in words, because so many cultures have different words for it. In fact, for that matter, they have different buildings for it. And different words for the different buildings. And different costumes for the people who hang out in the buildings. And--”

“OK, I get your point. But--”

“--But I think you’d better sit down. I’ve just started to apply the face bronzer, and if I don’t smooth it out, you are going to look like a T. Rex.”

Lucy knew what that meant, and she sat down. She put the cape back on, still eyeing the strange woman with the red hair. The woman gently, almost lovingly, began spreading and blending the toner. And suddenly . . . Lucy couldn't pinpoint it exactly, but the woman had an otherworldly touch. It was more than professional, it was more than gentle. It was as though she was blending some unseen element in the atmosphere into Lucy's skin, to make Lucy more "one" with the very air around her. The ether was seeping into her pores, and the drying and deadening surface cells were microscopically, invisibly sloughing and flaking off into the air. Lucy felt it was as though she was made out of sand or . . .no, no, made out of some brightly colored glitter, like those layered bottle sculptures of beach scenes she used to buy at the boardwalk stores when her family went to the ocean in the summers. And in the blending, in the taking in and the letting go . . . it was as though . . . Lucy felt less apart from the rest of the world than she usually did.

She had never told anyone, but she had always felt a bit apart from the world. Never quite as close as she wanted to be to her parents. Always feeling that the friendships between other groups of females were closer than any of hers had been. . . even during her most intimate moments with her husband, even when she had held each of her children in her arms as newborns, she would clutch the babies to her bosom and think, "*Who is this creature?*" And "*How the hell am I supposed to know what to do with it?*"

But all of that had suddenly changed.

That was when she saw the mirrors.

And Ariel saw that Lucy had seen the mirrors.

“I see that it has happened,” the cosmetologist said, “Look, it’s not something I can control, although I wish I could, in moments like just a heartbeat ago, when I saw the depth of your pain. But it’s happened.”

“What’s . . . what’s . . .” stammered Lucy.

“The mirrors were always there, for Pete’s sake, this is the make-up department of Macy’s,” retorted the ginger. “But the reflections . . .”

“Are these are who--*what* I think they are?” asked Lucy.

“That they are.”

“This is my future, isn’t it? My family?”

“That they are, dear. That they are.”

“Well, *their* future, I guess I should say . . .” murmured Lucy.

In that moment, Lucy became aware of the fact that there were seemingly hundreds of mirrors of all shapes and sizes, all around her, here in this Macy’s cosmetics department. She could not be sure if they were really there, or if only some of them were real, and the rest of them illusions--although who was to say what was an illusion, at this point? After all, for most of a person’s life (she pondered in that millisecond), death itself seemed like the greatest illusion, something both surreal and unreal to the very young, the rather young, even the middle aged. And yet nothing was more real to her in her life, right now. She knew Reggie was right. She knew she was going to die. And it was more than just the proof that Reggie had provided. It was this thing happening here, this miracle unwrapping before her.

Lucy watched the mirrors in wonder--at some moments, giggling, while at others, catching her breath in awe, fear, amazement, relief, surprise, heartbreak . . . then the entire cycle of feelings and faces starting again . . . as she watched her children grow up with their father . . . just their father, no mother. But the kids were hardly ever alone (even when they craved

independence), always helped along by four loving grandparents, friends, and neighbors.

“It really does take a village,” Lucy murmured to herself, as her eyes darted around the images playing out in the mirrors: Leanne, her oldest, eight years old at the funeral, being brave and shepherding her younger brother through the ritual, as he stared at the coffin in wide eyed befuddlement.

The images in the mirror blurred and then morphed, and the mourning party was now graveside at the cemetery. Lucy’s husband abruptly stopped crying, a sad smile crossing over his face, and he had a moment of peace. This image happened to be in one of the mirrors very close to her, and Lucy craned her head for a closer look: to her astonishment, Lucy saw a shadowy image of her own face just to the side of her husband’s face, resting her chin on his shoulder.

“But--that’s me!” cried Lucy, as Ariel meticulously applied face powder.

“Yes dear,” was all Ariel replied.

Lucy turned her attention back to the mirrors.

“Oh, look--they’ve left the cemetery! They’re back at the house! It must be the wake!”

All the mourners mingled, talking in low tones, and the children were sitting on the sofa, sniffing quietly. That was when their father walked in with a basket: inside, a puppy dog. There was the requisite squealing and cooing, the more grown-up Leanne showing little William how to hold the puppy properly.

Lucy, sitting in the stylist’s chair, smiled sadly, thinking about how she would miss these moments . . .

But the other-wordly forces, carrying out the missions and missives of their Higher Powers, had only just gotten started with Lucy Bingham. She was drawing a long sip of wine, watching as her own wake played out in the mirrors, paying particular attention to her husband. Lucy watched, fascinated, as her favorite old aunt approached Walter and handed him a big bundle of--baby!

“I think she wants her daddy,” Aunt Jenny said, patting Lucy’s husband on the back. And then she continued: “I know she’s only three months old, but I think she looks just like her mother. And every day more so. Look--Lucy’s eyes, Lucy’s chin . . .”

Lucy gasped, and dribbled a little wine down her dress. She whirled around to Ariel.

“I’m going to have--I’m pregnant? With a baby?”

“Usually the best thing to be pregnant with.”

Lucy whirled around again and stared at the mirror.

And suddenly, the picture was gone. The mirror had gone black.

“Wait, I want to see more!”

A kaleidoscope of images spun out, swirling in a whirl of mirrors, a thousand images of a family over the years.

Halloween: Leanne dressed up as a doctor, and little William dressed as a race car driver. Walter, ever the dutiful dad, had painted a large box, even given it working headlights, and William stood inside the box, two strings strung from the box and over his shoulder. And in between both of them, clutching both of her siblings’ hands, was little baby Betsy, known affectionately to all as “Itsy Bitsy”, dressed magnificently as a peacock. Betty looked to be about three. The long peacock feathers jutted out from her rump

in a magnificent plumed fan. Lucy laughed and clapped her hands, somehow looking crushed all at the same time.

“Oh God, it kills me that I’m not going to be there to see it.”

“You will. Trust me. You will.”

And then, in a moment that is gone as soon as it starts, the baby peacock, spotting a wee friend trundling along across the street, pulls away from her older sister and runs into the path of an oncoming car. A split second before tragedy, some unseen force pulls Bitsy back from the approaching hotrod crammed full of revelers.

The shadowiest image of Lucy, hovering in the air, saving her child, suddenly becomes a crystal clear image in the mirror—*crystal clear to watching Lucy, to “makeover” Lucy*. She smiles in sad awe.

“Oh my God.”

“Oh my God is what I say about your eyebrows,” Lucy chided. “Woman, just because you got a bad diagnosis is no reason to let yourself go. You’re still flesh and blood!”

“Oh, go on with you, Ariel. You’re a very strange sort.”

“Give me a break, I have a tough job.”

“Plucking my eyebrows?”

“No. Preparing you to leave this plane of existence, even as I show you how you are going to have one angel’s wing in it. Talk about the multiverse.”

“But I don’t see--”

“You will, Lucy. You’ll see everything, in time.”

“Oh my God!” said Lucy again--clearly her Greek chorus response to the pageant of the mirrors.

She watched as her children played out timeworn but beloved clichés: The school play. Plays. Her assorted kids taking on the roles, each in their

turn, as a pilgrim, a turkey, a wiseman, a carrot, a sugar plum fairy, a vitamin, a planet, a molecule, a bunny, a suffragette, a caveman, a dog, a heart, a spleen, Father Time, Abraham Lincoln.

And there was so much more.

Leanne's first kiss.

Then Lucy watched breathlessly, in another mirror, as Walter walked Leanne down the aisle, the storybook picture of a beautiful bride. The people sitting in the pews giggled, as a tiny cousin who was sprinkling rosebuds stepped on the edges of the floor-length veil and pulled it akimbo on Leanne's head. And nobody could ever explain how the veil quickly and perfectly righted itself before Leanne could even raise a hand to do it herself.

Now the kids were older, on a sad day when all of them, as a family, took the old hound dog to the vet to be put down. It was ancient and in constant pain, its insides finally giving up and shutting down. Then, a couple of days later, they all met high in the hills, at a bucolic dog park, and strewed Kibble's ashes. Lucy watched the ritual play out in the mirror, sniffing a little.

She watched, beaming, as her oldest daughter became a doctor, and her son became a scientist working to clean the planet. She bristled as she watched her youngest child, Betsy, cut herself, over and over again, and then sob herself to sleep from the brutal bullying at school. Lucy whirled around and stared at Ariel with a mixture of fury and desperation.

"I don't get it! Why is life so cruel, why can't I be there for her?"

"But you will be there, Lucy. I promise you will. Just on the other side of her breath, when she is in the angst of youth and the agony of adolescence, you

will be right there with her the whole time. You will be the voice in her ear when she is cutting herself. And for one horrible moment, when she is tempted to turn that cry for help into a scream, and a deep cut that invites sweet death--you will be there to mute that scream with love. You could not do that if you were still mortal flesh.”

“But why can’t I stop her from cutting herself in the first place, if I’m--”

“Can’t answer that--”

“--and why can’t a mother’s love stop that when the mother is still mortal flesh?”

“What I just said.”

“Can’t answer that? Or won’t?”

“Can’t.”

It would seem that the emissaries could be rough sometimes. A bit cruel, terrifyingly taciturn. Lucy looked back at the mirror. It went foggy, alarming Lucy, but then the images came back, brighter than before. She watched her troubled darling daughter come back from the brink, become an artist, and marry a wealthy man. She watched with amusement as this wild child, her Bohemian third child, created a career of ridiculous, wonderful, whimsical performance art, her most heralded one being the piece about her divorce.

She watched a ribbon cutting ceremony as her husband opened a series of dog parks, his pet retirement project.

There were Christmases and family reunions, loss and bounty, weeping and laughing so hard milk shot through noses. There were car accidents and illnesses, glorious vacations with panoramic views, touchdowns and standing ovations and hangovers and marriage, and a miscarriage and an affair, and forgiveness, and babies born from time to time. . .

She watched all of her grandchildren, dressed in their Easter best, hunting for a rainbow of hidden eggs.

She watched as one by one, her parents and her husband's parents passed gently out of this life. And beyond them, a mirror shrouded in some strange mist—was that otherworldly, or hairspray?—she watched as her parents and ancestors were united with her after her own death. It was exquisite. It was breathtaking. It was beyond what words created and defined by mere mortals can describe...

And she watched her own dear Walter fall asleep in his favorite recliner, never to wake again. And the mirrors teased her with a sweet moment of their reuniting in death . . .

Then, in a heartbeat, all the mirrors went dark.

But that did not matter to Lucy. Images whirled in her brain, and they were so colorful and powerful that she felt as if she was watching them on a wide screen TV right in front of her face. Suddenly she jumped up from the chair. She had to go home to her children. To her husband. How she would find the strength to tell him, she did not know. But she would. And then, together, they would find the strength to have this baby.

. . . And then after that, of course, the images in the mirrors would become her reality.

What a beautiful gift to receive from the universe and Ariel, whoever and whatever she really was. So she had that to look forward to . . . To be given all of those glorious images of growth, and life, and love, as she hovered on her own, other-worldly side of this life, only a heartbeat away.

CHAPTER TWENTY:
THE HOME MOVIES OF ROSE McALLISTER

IN GLORIOUS “LIVING” --AND WE
USE THAT WORD LOOSELY--COLOR.

It was the third night after she had found out the date of her death. It was the third dream. It was like no other dream she had ever had. She had experienced lucid dreaming before-- those curious dreams where you know you are dreaming, but you choose not to wake up. You know you are dreaming, but you stay in the dream, tumultuous though it may be, because you feel you have something to learn from it. Or because you believe that perhaps, just perhaps, if you can use your awareness of the fact that you are dreaming to change the outcome of the dream, then perhaps you can change your own future reality. Who knows?

But regardless, in the case of Rose McAllister, she was in. From the moment she realized that this was a lucid dream, she was all in.

She had fallen asleep after several glasses of red wine. She had turned off the late night talk show hosts, and she lay there in the darkness. Actually, since her goal was to fall asleep--even with her death coming in a few weeks, a person had to get some shut-eye, right?--anyway, she found herself reviewing her last two dreams. Monday night, after she had received the news, she did not dream of death. She dreamed that she had replaced Vanna White on Wheel of Fortune, and she had stepped into the role with grace and aplomb, Vanna's ire notwithstanding. The audience, which was strangely the size of a Super Bowl audience, cheered wildly for her. The next night, Tuesday night, she dreamed they were opening a Disneyland on Mars, and she was in charge of all the princesses--making sure their costumes were just right, chiding them for having tobacco yellowed fingertips from smoking offstage. Children did not want to smell that.

But then, before she knew it, another day of dread had passed. It was now Wednesday night, and she was into the third dream.

It was so clear, so real, that this time, this third night, she was *sure* it was all really happening.

As Lucy slept, Her grandmother and grandfather came into her bedroom, both dressed in cozy pajamas and robes and slippers, her grandmother holding mugs of hot cocoa. Both of her grandparents had been dead for years, but their presence did not seem strange to her at all--since this was, of course, just a dream.

"Wake up, Rose dear, we're doing home movies."

"But it's the middle of the night, Grammy Annie. I was sound asleep."

"Oh, that can be the best time to watch home movies," offered her Gramps. "Your subconscious is more open to their deeper meaning."

And so, very sleepily, Rose got out of bed, put on her blue fleece robe decorated with little white sheep, and slipped into her matching blue slippers. They all padded to the living room and settled down on the sofa. The ancient Kodak film projector had already been set up on the coffee table. Rose's face lit up.

"Wow, Gramps, I haven't seen this old thing in forever!"

"Works perfectly fine. Don't know why people have to rush out and buy every newfangled device they see advertised in the Sunday supplement. This will be just fine."

Then Rose saw the giant brimming bowl on the coffee table.

"Grammy, you made popcorn!"

"Of course I made popcorn. When have we ever had home movies without popcorn?"

"And look what else . . ." said Gramps, beaming. Rose rolled her eyes; the slightest look of disgust creeping across her face.

"No Gramps, no--"

"Yup! Cheeseburger in a can! Well, *Candwiches*, actually. I got a bunch of flavors, so you can have your pick: barbecue chicken, pepperoni pizza, bacon cheddar, apple turnover ... and your favorite--"

--there is no favorite *Candwich*, Gramps--"

--French toast in a can! With chocolate!"

"Well?" interrupted Grammy, obviously not enchanted with the can feast, "Are we gonna talk all night, or are we gonna get on with it?"

The projector began to whirr away, the light thrown from the machine's little eye onto the ancient screen forming the only light in the black room. Grammy grasped Rose's hand.

"Oh, look Rose, there you are in your coffin!"

Rose squinted and stared ahead, hardly believing what she was seeing. It was her viewing. She was watching her own viewing. This was the dream she had been dreading, the dream that imagined the future . . .

Mourners sat in long rows of chairs, and there was a line of people waiting to pass by her coffin. Many of the mourners tucked something into the coffin as they passed by, an homage to the life that Rose had lived, and the art that she had pursued--a realm of little people, little things, little worlds. Rose's friends placed around her corpse a cornucopia of offerings, as they had all discussed while they blubbered, just days earlier.

A miniature tabby cat, just like the real live one she had owned most of her adult life, until it finally passed away in its sleep, just a week before Rose had found out about her own date of death. This miniature one was felted, a calico, and no bigger than a thimble.

Then a teeny tiny wicker stroller, not molded plastic, but actually the finest of woven reed, the whole thing no bigger than a tangerine. It had been made especially for Rose, and it looked exactly like the real life one that Rose had inherited from her great great grandmother, and used to push her dear son through the park on walks.

There was a wee piano, with real wood inlay on top.

A 1:144 dollhouse, the size of a box of aspirin--a dollhouse for a dollhouse, so to speak.

And there was a variety box of Krispy Kreme donuts, no bigger than a Fig Newton.

A miniature chess game with a board the size of a postage stamp, with tiny chess pieces in amazing detail.

A glass bong only one inch high, hand blown by Uncle Rooster.

And one of her more sardonic artistic friends even put a small coffin--just six inches long--in Rose's coffin.

But Grammy was not interested in this minutia, she was admiring how pretty Rose looked.

“Almost like you’re just taking a little nap,” she said, invoking the time honored cliché. “Rose, you looked so pretty that day! Or perhaps I should say ‘will look so pretty’ --after all, you’re not dead yet! It’s all so hard to explain to someone who hasn’t crossed over. But look, dear, how elegant you are! I chose your black velour top and skirt, and your peacock kimono with the burned out velvet and all the beading. I know you love that. I made them think it was *their* idea, of course--the living can be so--well, never mind. And they did a really nice job with your hair and makeup, don’t you think? I wanted to go with a lighter shade of lipstick, but then I stopped and asked myself, ‘what would Rose choose?’ So red it is.”

“But Grammy, you’ve been dead for years, how can you have spoken to the mortician--or how can you, after I--?”

Her grandmother just threw her head back and laughed.

“I keep forgetting you aren’t on this side yet. When you are, you will realize what a ridiculous question that is.”

Gramps stopped the machine and barked at the ladies.

“Are you two gonna chew the fat all night, or are we going to watch these movies?”

“Oh Elbert, everybody talks through home movies. That’s half the fun,” said Grammy Annie, flicking the projector back on. “Rose, look how many people came to pay their respects! Aren’t you just the prom queen? And after that Bohemian life you led.”

None of this made sense to Rose, and yet it made perfect sense: it had the Alice In Wonderland whimsical logic of a dream. She was here, in her perfectly appointed living room, watching home movies of her imminent death

with her deceased grandparents. Rose did not know if she was flailing and talking during this dream--nightmare?--but she was surely glad that she had dropped her son off at his best friend's house for a sleepover. Anyway, if she began to scream or cry out uncontrollably, she reasoned, at least she would not frighten her son.

Suddenly there was a jump in the film, and they were at the cemetery.

"What about my eulogy?" Rose asked, "I don't get to hear what people say about me? I mean, is there anyone who doesn't fantasize about what people are going to say about them after they're gone?"

"Oh Rose, dear," Grammy sighed, "The world always did revolve around you."

"That's not true, I just--"

"Shush."

And so Rose did. She stared in silence as her coffin was lowered into the ground. This was it. This is exactly what it would look like, a few weeks from now. They were all there: Her son. Her neighbors. Her many friends. Some more distant relatives. No Mom and Dad, of course. They were with all of her grandparents, resting in burial plots close to hers.

The face that Rose could not stop staring at was, of course, her son. He was all she had thought about since she had gotten the news from Reggie. He was such a baby, only six years old. How would he get by without a mother? A loving aunt had offered a hundred times to raise the child, and now Rose knew she would be taking Aunt Tillie up on it. But a kid needs his mom. He needs his dad, too, but that was never to be. Her son had lost his dad before the poor kid could even form memories of him.

It was her son who threw the last rose on the coffin as it was being lowered into the ground. People crowded around each other, sobbing and hugging.

“What’s my epitaph? Gramps, why isn’t this in focus? I can’t read my epitaph. Who took this crappy home movie anyway?”

“Now she’s Roger Ebert!” said Grammy archly.

“Besides,” muttered her Gramps, “What do you care what some pinhead carved about you? You’re dead.”

“Yeah, but--”

“Oh, here’s the wake!” effused Grammy, in a carefree voice as if it had been Rose’s debutante coming out party. The scene had switched from the cemetery to indoors. “Can you believe that Eunice Bench had the gall to wear a floral print? Well, she never did like you anyway.”

But Rose wasn’t listening to her grandmother’s gossip.

She was following the camera intently as it took everything in: it seemed, uncannily, to know exactly what it was that Rose wanted to see. In the middle of all the gloomy adults feasting and chattering and telling sad tales about poor dead Rose was a little boy, her little boy, sitting on the sofa, holding a large scrapbook. He opened it and pointed to a picture of a child wearing OshKosh overalls, with hands covered in paint. The camera now saw the photograph in the album through her son’s eyes. How the camera did that, Rose did not know.

“Me?” the child asked, recognizing himself--or so he thought--in the photo.

“No, Tommy. That’s actually your mother,” said the boy’s Aunt Tillie. “But she looked a lot like you at that age. She was always such a tomboy,” the aunt said sadly, trailing off. The weight of where they were, of why they were all here, laid heavy on her. She held the boy close.

Rose stared at the flickering “home movies”, transfixed, her grandparents scrunched on either side of her, clutching her hands and giving her strength. And as the little boy in these home movies . . . Rose’s little boy, her son, her only child . . . leafed through Rose’s old photo album at the wake, the album seemed to come to life on the ancient movie screen in Rose McAlister’s living room. And while each chapter of her life was like watching a home movie, each chapter started with a still picture, as if to introduce its theme:

There she was, the birthday girl. Rose’s first birthday. At one year old, with the obligatory cake icing all over her face.

At two, tearing open a gigantic gift and hugging a huge stuffed sloth to her tiny self.

At three, blowing out candles on a cake. Rose studied the home movies in fascination.

“Oh my heavens, Grammy, was I ever that young? So wee . . .” murmured the adult Rose, the dying Rose, the dreaming Rose who (in her dream) was sitting on the overstuffed sofa drinking cocoa with her grandparents. Grammy patted Rose’s arm lovingly.

“Yes dear, you were. And I remember it like it was yesterday,” said her Grammy, kissing Rose on the cheek. And the movie continued.

From the age of four on, for little Rose, it was all about the dollhouses. A boring pink plastic Barbie Dream House seemed like a safe bet for that fourth birthday, but within a couple of years, this precocious child could handle a real dollhouse, with delicate wood furniture. Little Rose would handle each piece as though it was a baby bird, and the only time a single piece had broken was

when her father had clumsily tried to move the dollhouse from one room to another. Little Rose saw the breakage--some tiny dining room chair legs snapped off, and a poster on the grand little four poster bed, and a leg from a polyresin afghan dog--and clever Rose cried all afternoon, until her daddy agreed to repair those pieces and buy another dollhouse she'd had her eye on. After all, she did have another birthday coming up in a few weeks.

And the collection grew from there. Her fascination with the miniature world grew and expanded. Rose's third grade volcano project, for example. It was featured prominently at Parent's Night, and Rose's teacher gushed.

"My, my, your daughter is amazing! The rest of the children just did the basic volcano, but that tenacious daughter of yours--goodness, what an eye for detail! She not only named her volcano Vesuvius, but she actually made a miniature Pompeii! Genius!"

The tiny terrified town was made out of carved sugar cubes and embellished chalk for columns, all of it then sprayed with sand spray paint, to give it a stone look.

"And even the little citizens of Pompeii, running from the lava, she even added those!" effused the teacher to the proud parents. Meanwhile, Rose just stood on the sidelines, sticking her tongue out, right back at all the little students who were sticking their tongues out at her for being a show off.

And little Rose's life blossomed from there. A sewing room in her parent's house was transformed into a dollhouse room, and as the years went by (by now, a crowd of relatives at Rose's funeral were studying the pictures in the scrapbook, oohing and aahing), Rose's mother's sewing room gradually turned from a craft room to a whole mini neighborhood of Victorians, a Swiss Chalet, a beach house, a contemporary, a cabin in the woods, a butcher shop, a general store, an adobe home, a wonderfully retro fifties house, a frightfully

detailed haunted house, a Romeo and Juliet Tudor House, and a castle. Rose was even on the news from time to time, as stories of her ever burgeoning dollhouse collection traveled near and far. Sixty Minutes even came to her house once to do a story on her collection. The whole town was bursting with pride.

Then, just when the world was her oyster with an “R” in every month, Rose did what so many teenagers do, with no apparent reason: she began getting high.

And just as with all the other phases of her life, the home movies introduced it all by a picture from the other wordly photo album, as the wake party--her son, family, friends, and neighbors--all looked on. The images in the photograph swirled around, the figures began to move, and the home movie continued.

. . . Only now, it looked more and more like a morph between an old Movietone newsreel and a pretentious, stylized student film. And these flickering images were not captured by any camera, but rather erupted from the labyrinthine recesses of Rose's dark memories--and yet still, mystically, they appeared in the scrapbook that mourners were studying at the wake! The moving images showed her smiling as she took a deep toke from a bong, while she sat amongst her other stoner friends. Rose inhaled the seductive smoke deeply, holding it as long as she could, then exhaling, coughing, and making everybody else giggle. Even her son, watching this scene play out in the scrapbook, studying his mother from the safety of the wake and surrounded by loved ones, giggled, not understanding what he was seeing.

Rose--the dreaming, dying Rose--stood up from the sofa, stunned and embarrassed. She glowered at her Gramps and Grammy.

“Wait, this is all wrong! How the hell do you know about this stuff? It isn’t a part of any old home movie!”

“Well, Rosie, these aren’t ordinary home movies, now are they?” said Gramps softly.

“Look, I know I’m dreaming if that’s what you mean. But I--then why are you--and how did--”

“Oh, be quiet, dear, this is one of my favorite parts.” This from Grammy Annie.

Rose was in college now, attending a protest. She was in a crowd of students, maybe a thousand strong, carrying signs and screaming, “NO REX! NO REX! NO REX!” and “ONE MORE THING, KILL THE KING! ONE MORE THING, KILL THE KING!” Rose’s sign said what so many others said as well: “TIME FOR T. REX TO BECOME EXTINCT!”

“I was so proud of you, dear, although I was sure you’d get locked up in jail for life. Fighting that awful man!” effused Rose’s grandfather.

“Awful is too kind a word!” seethed Annie Grammy. “Frankly, I’m glad I kicked the bucket before it could become official. Elbert, I think you and I left this earth just in time.”

“Frankly, dear, I think it’s part of what killed me.”

And back inside the home movies, everybody who was gathered around the album at the wake, watching Rose protest, knew what old Elbert was talking about. The repealing of the 22nd Amendment. The hijinks and horrors that caused the overturning have been written about ad nauseam, an ocean of ink spent (most of those books being subsequently banned by the new President Rex [his new official title], of course), so I do not need to go into it here. Suffice it to say that this once wispy and soft spoken Rose McAlister had taken her share of macings, beatings, and nights in a jail cell, all because of her

fierce determination to fight the end of term limits for the United States Presidency.

But even as her dedication to causes grew in passion, so did her dedication to drugs grow in intensity.

And so Rose's life, spiraling into hell, continued to play out as home movies on the ancient projector in her darkened living room, while her grandparents watched calmly and sipped cocoa.

"Oh look, Rose. Here's you in the streets and alleys of Seattle, homeless and smoking from a meth pipe!" quipped her Grammy.

"Yes, yes, I remember. Always so headstrong. And a bit deceitful," her Gramps added.

Rose stared at them in disbelief. They were both as calm and unrattled as if they were watching her descend a staircase dressed for the prom. Grammy patted Rose's arm.

"Remember, you told your parents you were going to Seattle to be part of the 'art scene'? I think you just did it to get as far from your parents as possible!"

"That, and the drugs were plentiful," added her Gramps.

Again, Rose launched herself out of the overstuffed sofa.

"Oh. My. God. How the hell can you two be so cavalier about this? I'm homeless, smoking crack, for Christ's sake!"

"Careful, dear. Don't take the Lord's name in vain. And the answer is obvious: because you're not doing that anymore. That's why we can be so cavalier," cautioned her Grammy.

"I'm not doing it anymore because I'm dying."

“You’re not doing it anymore because you wanted a different kind of life. You stopped all that long ago, it had nothing to do with dying.” This from Gramps.

“We’re being cavalier--but I call it forgiving--because what you went through made you a better person. Surely you must see that, dear. Stronger. Kinder. Knocked you off your high horse. Even made you more creative, I think,” added Grammy.

Rose said nothing, but gaped at the images, as the humiliating truth of her life on the streets of Seattle began flickering on the screen, unwrapping in an artful but very x-rated montage. Men in luxury cars drove down alleys where no such car should journey, in search of the nubile young desperadoes and desperadettes--runaways who would do anything and everything for the promise of Panda Express for dinner, and a twenty to cover the cost of a flophouse room if the youth shelter was full up. The home movies were primitive, but strangely hypnotic: one moment they seemed to be in color, the next, black and white. You could tell you were watching flesh move, but you could not always tell which part of the body you were looking at.

But at other times, you could.

There were street lamps on skin, and the reflection of felonies in the glass on rain kissed windshields. There was shivering in the Seattle storms, and finding relief from it in the arms of a stranger whose slap hurt less than the pelting water from the black skies. And damned if it didn’t sting and sing just a wee bit of Mom and Dad.

There were tiny flea welts from discarded mattresses, but at least then you could pass off the track marks as insect bites. There was dumpster diving

for food, and the joy that came from discovering a discarded jacket or pair of shoes.

And there was lots and lots and lots of fellatio, punctuating the life of the homeless Rain City teens like dog walks and visits to the gym did for the middle class that they serviced in secret, down the alleys of White Center . . . dark places that such refined people would normally never traverse. But they would make an exception, desperately searching, as they were, for those young and willing mouths, so skilled beyond their young years.

And then there were the drugs. The gorgeous ritual, the sacred habit, more comforting to the soul than any parent had ever been--at least if you asked these kids, and such was all the explanation you needed for why they were on the streets in the first place. The chemical trips, those joyful journeys away from reality--hopefully, a daily thing--bound these kids together as much as the sad memories, the lurid sex tales, and the dreams of life off the streets.

Rose McAllister stared at her life on screen as though it had been someone else's life. She barked at her own image on the screen to stop--Rose was about to inject heroin into her veins. Her Grammy got excited and talked through the scene, like someone sharing a favorite film with the uninitiated.

"Now, you couldn't possibly have known this at the time," said her Grammy, leaning into Rose and pointing at the screen, "but that needle you are about to put into your arm, there? That heroin is laced with enough poison to kill a water buffalo! Of course, I don't imagine that a water buffalo would ever do such a ghastly thing. Inject. Anyway, the dealer who sold it to you cut it with fantabule."

"Fentanyl."

"Whatever. My point is, your savior happened upon you just in time."

On the screen, a shivering Rose crouched beside a rusted out refrigerator, her teeth clenching the rubber tubing wrapped around her arm, making her veins pop. The needle was just touching her skin . . .

That is when he came upon her: Doc. A plain man, a humble man, nicknamed Doc not because he had any medical degrees, but because he had finished his doctorate, only to eschew the ivory tower world of academia and instead set up a shelter for kids in the mean streets of Seattle.

Rose was startled, she dropped the needle.

And that was the moment that her life began to turn around. (Granted, this was not the first time she would have to be rescued from chasing the dragon. But suffice it to say that if she had not been rescued this first time, if she had not been given a respite from it all, allowing her body to heal just a bit, she probably wouldn't have been alive to try riding the dragon a second time.)

Doc was a miracle. He watched as she crouched by the rusted out fridge, and slowly dropped the needle. He helped her up from her dirty corner of the alley, but then let go of her hand. He was careful not to touch her after that; he could see in her eyes that she'd had enough of all that for a lifetime. But he took her heavy pack from her, and she followed, not knowing how she knew that this man would be safe. An hour later, she was safely tucked inside a youth shelter. She had showered, been given some clean pajamas, eaten a decent meal, and nestled herself into a bed in a room along with a dozen other sleeping girls.

He was too good to be true. But that is the way of it, sometimes. Angels fall from heaven. And stay awhile, before they ascend again.

After she had been there a month, experiencing a not-too-harrowing detox, and presumably earning a level of trust from those in charge, Doc helped Rose get a job. The Seattle Children's Museum was highlighting a traveling show of some of the best doll makers in the country--Marylin Fill, Sharon Cariola, Uta Brauser, Darya Milova, Glenda Hooker, and more.

"These are the best. The best of the best," Rose said in hushed awe when she saw the program.

"But Rose," Doc had warned her, "If you so much as steal Barbie's purse, there'll be hell to pay. And you'll ruin it for a hundred girls in circumstances like yours for years to come."

Rose nodded dutifully and was on her best behavior through the weeks of the show's duration.

The time in Seattle played out as a montage on the screen, and as Rose on the sofa viewed Rose in the home movies, tears came to her eyes, as she watched her life turn around. And tears also glistened in the eyes of Rose on the screen, as she hugged her savior and boarded a train back to the east coast. She loved her new life and everything he had done for her, but there were just too many ghastly memories of these Seattle streets, and more importantly, she had some urgent amends to make.

"We are coming up on my favorite part of the movie!" gushed her Grammy, squeezing Rose's arm.

"My wedding!" Rose squealed like the young bride she had once been. It was as though the word "wedding" was potent enough to block out all the drama that had come before it--and after.

And sure enough, this part of the home movie looked exactly like a regular home movie. In fact, it had been a part of the family's actual collection, and Rose had rewatched it maybe a hundred times.

Rose came out of a side door of her folks' country club in a white dress that made her look like a merengue confection, and she beamed at her waiting husband-to-be. His hair was so perfect, it looked to have been molded on him, like a Ken doll. His teeth glistened in the sun as he beamed at Rose. The whole affair was being held under a sprawling canopy, and the place was crazy crowded with roses in every shade of pink. Rose's parents had never looked happier--or for that matter, more smug--in their entire lives. Rose was marrying her high school sweetheart Steve ("Stevie"), nobody less than the Madison Warhawks' star quarterback.

Their romance had been interrupted by Rose's eruption of Bohemian dreams and schemes, but now, with all of that behind her, she was back on track. It had been just after graduation, after three years together, that the couple had finally started drifting apart. Rose getting into that weird art scene, that's what had done it. But now all was right in the world again. Rose had crawled home from those dirty, druggy alleys, and realized the enormous error of her ways. They had found each other again. He was safe and prosperous, handsome and popular, confident and industrious. He was perfect.

Nobody could have imagined on that blissful day, that soon, and in the near future, he would be regularly beating her black and blue.

Suddenly, the images of the wedding on the screen began to blur, and when the focus returned to the movies, it was another stormy night (not a good sign), and once again, these were home movies that nobody would have taken in this world, not on this plane of existence. It was a dark highway, a dark car. Rose's parents sat chuckling and joking in the front seat, while Steve and a very pregnant Rose giggled in the back, still pawing each other like newlyweds--

--when out of nowhere, a tractor-trailer careened into them, cue country and western song with tragic lyrics, cue crashing of metal sounds, and the luxury car is spinning over and over again down an embankment.

Now, the home movies become a series of jump cuts, as though the editor himself is high on something.

CUT TO: Rose sobs over the two coffins of her dead parents. A sea of black all around her, as the priest eulogizes over the loss of this wonderful and loving couple. Rose places a single rose on the coffin of her mother, then one on the coffin of her father. It took her a long time before she could visit the very tiny coffin.

CUT TO: Rose sits in a cold plastic chair next to a hospital bed, clutching her husband's hand. He is out cold from the drugs they have administered, and his head is swathed in bandages. And when the bandages come off, he looks like the Elephant Man. Rose cries quietly. She cries not just for the tragic disfigurement of her Adonis husband, but also for the miscarried child that she lost in the accident.

The first beating comes out of nowhere, following a bout of heavy drinking, and it so surprises Rose that she feels somehow it must have been her fault.

Rose sits on the sofa between her grandparents and sobs uncontrollably at the next montage. Black eye. Bloody nose. Knocking on the door from concerned neighbors. A visit from the cops. More beatings, then more severe

beatings, because the cops had come. It is not a new story. It is not a very good movie.

Until the storyline perks up--and Rose packs her bags, leaving while he is out at his favorite sports bar, where his old mates have enough respect to act as though nothing has happened to his face and his life. And where for a while, he can be a big man on campus again . . .

CUT TO: A fancy uptown art gallery, the gala opening of a prominent artist. A glittering evening. Rose, the curator of this event, has never looked better. She has reclaimed her life from the Beating Man. And her appearance heralds that truth. Her exotic hair (the exact shade that you are picturing it right now), is piled up high, with a few tendrils dancing around her face, and she wears a long burnout velvet kimono, with black silk slacks and quartz druzy jewelry. Her charisma even overshadows the artist, and she is the bell of the ball. She vampishly vapes as men hover around, none of them suspecting that she is vaping heroin.

CUT TO: Which is probably why it seems like a good idea to Rose . . . a good idea at the time . . .to steal money from the gallery later that night, after all the sophisticates have gone for the evening. And after all, she has the presence of mind not to take *all* of the money. Just an amount that she can later explain away with a good story. Or replace before anyone calculates that it's missing. Whatever.

CUT TO: She still has the needle in her arm when they arrest her the next morning. She is passed out cold when they find her. She screams and fights. She even bites an officer. She is an unholy mess of a human being.

Suddenly Rose jumped up from the sofa and glared at her bemused grandparents.

“I don’t care if this is a dream, I don’t care what you said before, about me surviving it. You aren’t my grandparents, you must be imposters up from hell to show me all these things! All this, these memories, this is agony. It’s humiliating. I won’t watch anymore.”

“You WILL.”

“Sit DOWN.”

It was a united frontal attack.

“Why should I?”

“You know, dear,” said her Gram-Gram. “You’ve always had an ungrateful streak about you. Entitled.”

“Rose, do we have to spell it out for you?” said her grandfather.

“Damn right you do.”

“Sweetheart,” said her grandmother. “What are you scared of most in the world?”

“My son growing up without his mother, of course.”

“He doesn’t have to. He never had to. He never will.” said her grandfather calmly.

“Rosie,” said her grandmother. “All those times you averted disaster. Death. Jail. Life going on for you, down in the sewer like that, things never changing, never getting better . . . every time you were about to fall into the pits of Hades itself, who the heck do you think it was that pulled you out?”

“Rosie, watch. Maybe this will make you believe,” urged her grandfather.

He pulled an ancient yellowed box from his trouser pocket, with “Angel Filter” scrawled in gnarly handwriting on the top. He opened it ever so gently and screwed it on the front of the projector lens. Then, with a flick of a button,

the film ran backward at lightning speed. The cranky old machine rattled and clicked and muttered, and it seemed smoke would come out of its little orifices at any moment. Then, when they had gotten several minutes back on the film (or several years, depending on your point of view), he stopped and ran it forward again, at double speed.

And that is when Rose saw it. Saw them. They were there, everywhere, almost all the time. Around her, surrounding her. Hovering and lurking, swooping and darting. Angels. Astral guides. Ancestors. Some didn't even look human. Fairies? Leprechauns? Animal shape-shifters? She was dizzy, she was dreaming, none of this was real, she told herself, and yet there it was. Spirits and sprites rescuing her at every turn. Mostly, though, her rescuers were her grandparents. And after that horrific car accident, her mother and father. They were the ones helping her to pack frantically, grab the cat and get the hell out. Away from the Beating Man.

Her grandparents watched Rose watch.

Finally, when they saw that she had absorbed it all, her grandmother spoke.

“Rose, what if Tommy ends up being just like you? He's already headstrong like you, and crazy creative like you. Add to that a little entitled streak of self-destruction . . .”

“No, no Grammy--”

“We know it's scary,” said her grandfather. “But you'll be there for him. Every step of the way. Now, shall we watch the rest?”

Rose said nothing, but just stared, mute, at the screen.

It picked up where it had left off--with Rose being arrested for stealing gallery money, and high as a kite when they found her.

CUT TO: She still had the needle in her arm when they arrested her the next morning. She was passed out cold when they found her. She screamed and fought. She even bit an officer. She was a mess of a human being. Rose could not have imagined that this very day--the day that ended with her suffering through withdrawal in a jail cell--was actually the best day of her life. Thus far.

This had been her rock bottom. She would turn away from that life forever, fall in love with her rehab counselor, and have his baby a year later. Everything would have been perfect, had he himself not decided what the hell, one more ride on the dragon, just one more time. For all his accolades and titles, he had always known that he would not, *could not*, go through the rest of his life without taking a ride just one more glorious, wicked time.

CUT TO: Rose comes home from the park with her toddler, and finds her husband dead.

From that time on, Rose-on-the-sofa could not tell if the home movie went on for another ten minutes, or two hours. The meaning of time had changed. The meaning of everything had changed. The years spun out before her as the spool of film ticked and clicked through the ancient projector:

Rose buried her beloved, and then soldiered on with her life. And she marched that path with her new baby boy. It had been a too-long waltz between carnage and courage. It had taken just this much heartbreak, just this much death, but she had stumbled into the sewers of depravity and addiction for the last time. Snoring. (?)

Rose awoke with the dawn, shaken to the core by this strange dream to end all dreams, yet vaguely . . . oddly . . . surreally comforted.

She padded her way into the kitchen to make coffee.

And that was when she noticed it.

A garbage pail full of empty Sandwich cans. And sitting unopened on the counter, her one true favorite flavor: peanut butter and honey.

So that was basically how it went for all the people who were informed by Reggie of their impending deaths. Angels and emissaries popped up everywhere, all around them, in the strangest--yet commonest--of places.

Angels appeared in crowds on the streets, and in throngs at the shopping malls, and they idled with folks at the city parks. They huddled in alcoves with humans during sudden thundershowers, and were one with the commuters making their way down stairways and onto the subways. They drove cabs, they manned the buses, they clerked the shops. They tore your ticket and made your copies and barristed your beverage and gave you the key to the restroom. They dressed up as sandwiches, handing out flyers for new eateries. They sold hot dogs from kiosks. (And being angels, it is worth noting that they sold the best damn hot dogs you have ever tasted in your life. Seriously.) Standing on street corners all across the globe, they juggled balls and drew caricatures and made balloon animals and played the guitar and oh, just generally, busked with the best of them.

And were their wings a problem? But of course they were, if the angels were cramping themselves into rooms, buildings, or other such human made boxes. For a split second, an ephemeral anthropos jammed into an elevator or being mob-driven down an escalator found himself, found herself, playfully feathered up by the eternal. Wings brushed against pedestrians and passersby of all sorts, some of whom felt the tickle of the divine, of immortality . . . and for a few fleeting moments or hours, they had a better day. For the more guileless among the brushed and blessed, their lives were actually changed. Feathers were found, and kept. This, in Midtown? This had been no pigeon.

Angels. Ah, cherubim and seraphim! (Dogs and cats, and all non-human things with a heartbeat, recognized these capricious celestials immediately.)

Homeless souls, dressed in rags and rattling cups and holding signs appeared to the rest of the world to be begging for alms, when in reality (!?) they were messengers from the Great Beyond, telling those with expiration dates the deeper truths they needed to know in order to make peace with their dying. Caracurists appeared to be amusing passersby with cheerful lampoons of the parade of homosapien physiognomy, but were in fact imbuing the chosen doomed with visions of a paradise that no church has ever been pure enough to divine. Stars of hit television shows halted their thespian shenanigans long enough to break the fourth wall, stare at some cursed viewer through the television screen, and utter calming insights and startling promises. Even airline pilots--when it surely sounded to the average auricle as though the intercom was merely offering altitude info and arrival updates--were sending a different message to the ears of the soon-to-be demised; they were actually factually rendering a monologue of mysteries and

miracles, of powers and joys and blessings and paydays heretofore unimagined by the human mind.

And while the vast hordes of humans did not notice them, the dying did. Oh, the dying did. And the dying knew--for there are many gifts that go with dying--that the angels had been there all along, but most folks were just too worldly and preoccupied to notice.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE:
SERA'S PLAN

Reggie and Sera sauntered along through the park, eating their deep fried gristle on a stick. She was in an ebullient mood. Reggie hoped he was the reason.

“What are you so happy about?”

“Not happy, really. Nervous.”

“Nervous about what?”

“I guess I’m sort of happy, you know, because something really good could come from it.”

“What, what already?”

In moments like this, he so wanted to kiss her, but he always remembered the rules. The boundaries.

“I suppose I’m scared, Reggie but if things go the way I think they will--”

“Sera, for Pete’s sake!”

“O.K. already, here’s the story. Nobody knows, Buzz doesn’t know, nobody knows. You’ll be the only one, Reggie, and you have to swear that you won’t tell anybody else.”

“Of course, Sera.”

“Anyway, about six weeks ago, I was down in Vicker’s Village--”

“Wait, isn’t that by the water? Near Comfort Point, where that crazy guy buried his wife in sand up to her neck and--”

“Oh for God’s sake, Reggie, that was years ago, and that man is rotting in hell.”

“Cripes, Sera, what were you doing in a nasty place like that? That is one helluva dangerous neighborhood.”

“Well, I know a lot of people think that. But it’s not so much dangerous, as it is really poor. I go down there from time to time because I know people who live there. It’s heartbreaking how little they have. The way they struggle every day for everything.”

“But Sera, why? Why take the risk?”

She stopped and stared at him, suddenly annoyed, and he was instantly mortified. Her disapproval was the worst.

“Why do you think, Reggie? I go down there to help the people with their pets. Heck, those people can barely afford to feed themselves, or take their kids to a doctor. You think they have money to take care of a sick dog or a cat? And don’t try that horrible argument where people say that if you can’t afford to take care of a pet, you shouldn’t have one! Why, some of the homeless people on the streets probably wouldn’t even be able to get up in the morning and face another day, if they didn’t have their pets to cling to! Reggie, I’ve even seen cases--”

“--Hey, Sera. It's me. *Me* you're talking to, remember? Aren't you supposed to be directing this anger towards the person who harbors bullshit elitist opinions like that? Aren't you really talking to *Buzz* right now?”

She looked chagrined.

“Well, I guess you're right. You have been pretty great about the whole animal thing. I just get so, so--”

“I know, Sera. I know. Although it still scares me to think about your being down there in Vicker's Village by yourself. Maybe next time I should go with you.”

“No way. They only trust me if I go alone. But I'm getting ahead of myself.”

“Who's 'they'?”

“Well, it's like this. You must know I self-inject right?”

“Yeah, I noticed. But it's not like I was going to say anything.”

“I have--well, I might as well just say it. It's dermacarcin. I mean, it's not contagious, you know that. But it's uncomfortable as hell, and it can be embarrassing too.”

“You shouldn't be embarrassed, Sera. You know who should be embarrassed, is our leader. Leaders. It's the governments of the world that should be embarrassed, letting the air get so dirty that someone can get sick just from walking outside their house, into the atmosphere. Heck, you wait for a bus for twenty minutes or dine al fresco, and suddenly you have a skin rash over half your body. That is so wrong.”

Sera scowled straight ahead at nothing.

“Yeah. But it doesn't affect them, so what do they care? They're all set, what with their domes and pods and luxury biospheres.”

“Sera, you're changing the subject.”

“I know, I know. But anyway, I self-inject to treat it. With all my vet connections, I can get the medicine and the needles and stuff.”

“I’m listening.”

“And you know damn well I’m not going to the doctor if there’s any way I can avoid it. I’ll be damned if I--”

“Sera, I know where you’re going. I self-medicate, too. Everybody knows that once they go to a doctor, every little thing goes on your record, and the record goes to the state. And everybody hears the rumors. People with certain medical records just drop out of sight. Then the official version claims that they’ve just moved, but somehow that can never be backed up or proven.”

“Exactly. So you see where I’m going, I self-medicate.”

“And Vicker’s Village is where you get the drugs? Dermacarcin requires some fiercely regulated meds.”

“No, no, I’ll tell you, if you’ll stop interrupting.”

At this, Reggie just looked down and smiled. Gosh, he loved her. She took a deep breath and continued.

“So here’s the story. I brought up the self-medicating because of the track marks. When I inject, I usually wear long sleeves for a couple of days, but on this particular night, it was nasty hot. Muggy, and humid. And I was exhausted. See, I’d left work at the vet’s to go to the village, to help this family with their dog and her new puppies. She’d been undernourished throughout her pregnancy, and the puppies needed some vitamin shots and such. Then I stopped by to give a neighbor’s cat a few stitches, and I put one of those cones on it. Also, I stopped by this old man’s house and euthanized his dog. That dog was about a hundred years old, and really suffering, and he just couldn’t watch that dog suffer anymore. I hated it, of course, but I hated that poor dog’s misery more. So I did it. Anyway, by the time I’m heading home, it’s maybe two in the morning, and I have never been so tired, right? So I go to the park

that's there, Wentworth Woods, you know it? Anyway, I have a little sterling silver flask in my bag--it's got my initials engraved on it; Buzz gave it to me for my eighteenth--and I take a hit from it. I'm just sitting on a bench at two a.m., having a cocktail, and in hindsight, that was pretty stupid--"

Reggie stopped in his tracks and eyeballed her.

"Uh, yeah!"

"I know, but Reggie, ever since I was little, I felt like--well, I'm not going to say that I'm never going to die, but it's more like I've always felt protected by some force, you know. . .or maybe it's just that I feel like, when your number is up, it's up, and there's nothing you can do."

As she prattled on, in her charming and naive way, Reggie was dying inside. There were these brief moments when he actually forgot what was going to happen to her, particularly if he was wearing his special glasses, courtesy of the professor. But then, something like this would come up.

"Anyway, Reggie, you have to picture the scene in your head. Me in my green doctor's scrubs. A flask in my hand. And track marks on my arm, as I sit under a street lamp in the worst part of town."

"I got it."

Reggie was trying not to lose control. He wanted to pick her up and throw her over his shoulder and carry her to safety, but where the hell would that be?

"So this guy comes up to me--no Reggie, don't make that face, it wasn't like that--anyway, this guy comes up to me, and he says that he can see I'm a medical person, but he can also see that I like a little hit every now and then, you know, a high, an escape. The track marks, right? Which is just me injecting my dermacarcin medication, but whatever. And then he says that I look like I could use some money, a place to stay or whatever. And he says that he can help me with the money part. If I can provide my medical services."

“I don’t like where this is going, Sera.”

“--whatever, Reg. So then he says that he has some steady work, where I can give emergency aid to dogs who are in bad shape, and he’ll give me cash, right there, nothing on the books, so naturally, I leap at the chance. I mean, I don’t need the money, of course, this isn’t about the cash, but I do want to help these dogs, whoever they are, right? I’ve got to do what I can for these dogs, right?”

“Uh, right. . .” Reggie stammered nervously.

“And so I get up and go with him, and what do you think he was talking about the whole time? Dogfighting! Can you believe it?”

For the second time, Reggie stopped in his tracks and stared at Sera. “*Dogfighting?! You’re involved with people who--but you could--they could--*”

“Don’t worry, I wasn’t stupid about it, all he did was take me to this vacant lot behind an old apartment where there were a bunch of dogs in cages, and my God, Reggie, they were in bad shape. I started to freak out! I mean, I have never seen anything quite like that. But I knew I had to keep it together if I was going to help the dogs. So I’m trembling, but I have my bag, you know, and I sort of just, well, start. Well, long story short--I mean, really, nasty, bloody, horrifying long story short-- I helped all these dogs . . . but some of them didn’t make it.”

Sera started to tear up, but she took a deep breath and continued.

“Anyway, the guy keeps his promise and gives me a big wad of cash. And I don’t care about that, but I’m thinking, wow, this is maybe the worst moment of my life, and the best moment. At the same time. I’ve never seen carnage quite like this, but I also never felt so helpful. To ease the agony of those poor dogs. Even the ones that couldn’t survive their injuries, and all I could do was

help them into sweet death, over to Rainbow Bridge. Do you think about death much, Reggie?”

Reggie was dying inside. Absolutely dying.

“Go on with your story, Sera.”

This time it was her turn to do an about-face and stare at him.

“Wow. I’ve never heard that tone in your voice.”

He didn’t reply, but just gazed at her with an intensity that frightened her a little.

“Anyway, Reggie. . . here’s the deal. Since that day, I’ve been doing that once a week, after the big weekend fight. The second week we switched it from morning till night, right after the dogfights were over. That way, we could save--well, you know. And of course, I wasn’t treating them outside anymore, there was this makeshift hospital that we set up in a basement.”

Reggie stopped again, for a third time, and turned to Sera. He put his hands on her shoulders, scaring her.

“Are you kidding me, Sera? Are you seriously telling me that all this time, without telling me--or anybody--you have been sneaking out in the middle of the night in this city, *in this city*? And going down to Vicker’s Village and letting yourself be taken into some basement? How are you even still alive to tell me this?”

And in that haunting moment, he actually wondered why Sera’s day of death, the date that would not stop dancing over her beautiful, stubborn head, was not a more imminent number.

“Look, Reg, I knew you’d say that. And I can’t even imagine what Buzz would say if he knew. So he doesn’t know, and he’s not going to find out. But the good news is this: they lose too many dogs waiting to have them treated, even if it’s just a half-hour for transport. And dogs are money to these monsters. So now, they’re going to let me go to the actual fights and treat the

dogs, because I've gained their trust, you see? God help me, I have no idea how I'm going to get through something like that, but hopefully, I won't have to. The entire reason I've been doing all this--apart from helping the dogs, of course--is to take these evil bastards down. Friday night, once I'm there, and God help me--once there is proof that this is an actual dog fight--I'm calling the cops. Taking them down, taking them all down."

Reggie studied her in disbelief. He saw a park bench nearby, led her to it, and sat down, gesturing for her to sit down next to him. Sera smiled naively.

"Reggie, I can make this work. And I'll call from my cell phone before anything gets too bloody. I can save those dogs."

"You've got to be kidding me! You cannot possibly be serious. Sera, they will kill you. Literally. They will slit your throat."

"No, no, see, that's the brilliant part of it! They won't, not if I'm arrested along with everybody else."

"Oh, because that's not transparent at all. Who would be so clever?"

"Look, you can snark all you want, this is happening."

"No, it's not. Over my dead body. Which I fear may end up being the case."

He dared not tell her what he knew would be the case. That she would, indeed, die. And now, in this ghastly and morbid moment, a chill ran down his spine. Such a deathly chill had never gone down his spine, not in all his days. Not even when he heard his parents were dead, or when he watched his brother die. But Sera was studying him closely, and she could see that she'd made a mistake in trusting him.

"FORGET IT, REGGIE. I am doing this. Dammit, I knew I shouldn't have told you."

"Sera, I know you love these dogs, but there's got to be another way."

“There isn’t. I can’t tell the cops where to bust the fight if I’m not *at* the fight. You don’t think these evil monsters are going to give me the address, do you?”

“Oh God. . . Sera, look, at least let me go with you.”

“No.”

“Then I’ll just follow you anyway.”

She sighed and rolled her eyes, studying him.

“Well, they trust me. I can tell them you’re my assistant. It’s almost impossible to treat those dogs, given the shape they’re in after a round in the ring, with only me to help them. They’ve actually been after me to bring along someone else, someone I trust. And I trust you.”

Reggie smiled, a bit relieved, but mostly horrified.

Now he knew how Sera was going to die.

And he knew, without a doubt, how he would die. And when he would die.

“Oh well . . . ” he reasoned to himself, without uttering a word to her. Men had been declaring their passions, their willingness to die for love, since the beginning of time. Reggie would be just one of those men who meant what he said.

An hour later, Reggie was sitting with the professor, although “sitting” might be something of a misnomer. He was twitching, sweating, and muttering incoherently, between sentences of frantic conversation.

“So what do I do?” said Reggie to the professor. “Do I try and stop her? Do I go with her? I’m of a mind to just kidnap that crazy woman, for her own good. Until the day of her--until the date passes.”

“Kid, you know none of that will work. First of all, you can’t kidnap her because--well, you just can’t. A dozen reasons. And from the way you describe her, she won’t be stopped or talked out of it. And even if you told her the whole story, about your gift, and . . . well, what I’m saying is, she will flee from you. Think you’re insane, and bolt. Then how can you protect her? Besides--and I hate to be the one saying this--but her date is her date, kid. Throw her in the trunk of your car to keep her from going to the dogfights, maybe she suffocates in the trunk. Besides, didn’t you say that the dogfights were Saturday night? And her death is on Sunday?”

“Yes, Professor, but the number of things that could happen Saturday night, to push things into the wee hours of the morning on Sunday--”

“And that is exactly why you will tell her nothing, nothing that might scare her off so that you can’t protect her. But instead, my friend, you will follow her into the jaws of hell, and love her even unto death.”

Meeting adjourned.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO:
BEGINNING OF THE END

The day had arrived. It was the day leading up to the night of the dogfights, and no amount of reasoning on Reggie's part had been able to dissuade Sera from going forth with her plan. She was going to die today, Reggie thought to himself, as he brushed his teeth and fed Hawking.

He passed the day dealing with the other dying folks, shepherding them through adventures such as you have just read about in the proceeding pages. He even called some of Russell's old friends, about taking over care of Hawking, should something happen to. . . should something happen. He was an absolute nervous wreck the entire day. Ten times an hour, he wanted to call Sera and shriek into the phone, "You're going to die, and a dogfight is an obvious way to get killed! Don't go!"

But hadn't a parade of people who had come before attempted to cheat death and failed? Arrogant Rhoda Embers, and that jerk Carpaccio, and evil A.J. the corrupt cop? And the grifters, Joe and DebOrah? And more, so many more. Too many people to list here. The stories were encyclopedic.

Sera was going to go through with this crazy scheme. And all Reggie could do was love her through it. And, he suspected, die right along with her. After all, since that first fateful day when he began to see the numbers over the heads of other humans, he had never been able to see his own date of death. Maybe that was God's way of protecting him. Maybe this was God's way of testing him. Maybe he would die tomorrow.

The day passed agonizingly slowly, but finally dusk arrived. Then, the city's version of darkness. Reggie struggled with every fiber of his being to act normal when he knocked on Sera's door. She answered, perky and all smiles. She knew nothing. And Reggie knew he could tell her nothing. The professor had been right--she would shoot the messenger, flee from his sight. And then, he would have no way of protecting her. Or dying with her, if that's what it came to.

"The fights start at ten sharp," she said, grabbing her coat. "That's what Hank told me. I have an address."

"And you said that these fights are always over well before midnight?" Reggie asked.

"Yes, Reggie. The boss is superstitious that way. He doesn't like anything that takes place around midnight--he's apparently all involved with the new Santeria, he thinks the demons abound around the witching hour. And he doesn't like to start until ten, because he says he feels safest when the streets are at their most unsafe--you know, the cops are distracted and overwhelmed. And everyone knows that the streets in this city become the wild west, come sundown."

"He runs a sport that makes a fortune slaughtering dogs, but he's afraid of demons at midnight?"

"Whatever, Reggie. He says the fights are usually over in an hour, then it's just you and me to take care of the injured dogs."

They had decided to take a cab to the address that Sera had been given. Something felt wrong about taking Reggie's car. It seemed like too much of a connection to a person's real identity. They paid the taxi driver and got out, both of them visibly nervous. A trail of creepy looking men made their way into the side door of the darkened, dilapidated building. Sera pulled out her cell phone and dialed a number. Reggie said nothing, but just watched, adjusting his backpack as he listened to her talk:

"Hank, it's me. I'm outside. Look, if I'm going to do this, I'm not going to stand out here in line with all these creeps and thugs. They make me very nervous. Have someone let me in. Now."

Seconds later, a little rodent-like man came scurrying out the side door and headed towards Sera. She seemed out of place, the only girl in the crowd.

"You Sera?" the man asked.

"Yes, and this is Reggie. He's my assistant. I can't help the dogs without someone to assist. These dogs get violent when they're all chewed up," she said, already angry about her reason for being there.

Rodent Man shrugged.

"Yeah, whatever, just come with me."

Sera and Reggie followed him, past the row of waiting men, and through the door. Suddenly they were stopped by a large, beefy man covered with colorful tattoos. He held out a metal detector wand. Sera scowled at him.

"Seriously? Do I look like I'm packing a gun?"

"Everybody gets wanded. It's to detect cell phones, too. Gimme your cell phone. Nobody gets a call out from here snitching, telling anyone our location. You think the boss is stupid?"

But Sera was focused on one word.

"Phones? You want our phones?"

"In the bin. You'll get it back when everything is over."

“But--but I’m the veterinarian, surely those rules don’t apply.”

“THE BIN.”

Reggie stepped in between them, gingerly taking Sera’s phone from her.

“Sera, I don’t think this is a guy we want to cross.”

“That’s right, squirt,” Tattoo Man said, holding out the wand.

Reggie gently placed Sera’s phone and his own phone into the bin.

Reggie tried to pass, but the wand still beeped.

“And no backpacks, either, four-eyes,” barked Tattoo.

“Ok, but I gotta get my lunch.”

Reggie reached into his backpack and pulled out an old-fangled metal child’s lunch box. The theme was vintage Star Trek. The tattooed man laughed at the lunchbox, then smiled what he thought was a winning smile at Sera.

“Is he kidding with this, lady? It’s metal, squirt, hand it over.”

Sera scowled at Reggie.

“Seriously, Reggie? A lunchbox?”

“Hey, you said we’d be here till morning with these chewed up dogs. I have very delicate blood sugar.”

Meanwhile, Tattoo Man was chuckling as he dumped the contents of Reggie’s lunchbox onto the table. Reggie grabbed at the peanut butter and jelly sandwich defensively.

“What am I supposed to do with my sandwich now?” asked Reggie.

“Put it down your pants, for all I care.”

Defiantly, Reggie did. The tattooed man rolled his eyes. Sera glared first at Tattoo Man, then at Reggie, her hands on her hips.

“You’re both ridiculous. I need to set up. Hank said there would be a room?”

“Not here.”

“What?”

And with that, the wiry Rodent Man who had ushered them into the building stood up on a makeshift platform and pounded his fist on the table to get everybody's attention.

"Yo. Vans are loading. NOW."

"What--what is he talking about?" said Sera and Reggie together, to Tattoo Man.

"Oh, this is your first time, honey, I forgot. The fight is never here. It's never at wherever is texted out as the first location. Everybody meets here, phones and weapons are confiscated, then we van to the location. Double layer of protection against the cops."

"LET'S MOVE IT!" barked Rodent Man, as the crowd of men, obviously familiar with the routine, headed out a rear door. But Reggie was frozen, white as a sheet.

"Sera. I thought you said this thing would start at ten, and be over by eleven. At the latest."

"Well, yeah, I thought . . ."

"ON THE VAN." Tattoo Man was on one side of them, Rodent Man on the other.

Reggie looked at his watch--10:30. By the time they got to wherever they were going and unloaded the van, it would be eleven, no doubt. The fights would last for at least an hour--then it would be midnight of the fatal day. He turned to Tattoo Man.

"We've changed our minds. She's not going."

Sera said nothing. She had silently, instinctively, put herself in Reggie's hands, although she did not understand the depths of his urgency. Then, suddenly, she forced a flirtatious smile.

"He's right, we'll skip this one. We'll just see ourselves out."

Sound of a gun cocking.

Reggie swallowed audibly. The gun was pointed at him. In a burst of chivalry, Tattoo Man had not pointed it at the good doctor.

“Once you’re here, nobody leaves. Too easy for someone to call the cops.”

Behind them, the men were pushing towards the door. Within a few minutes, the drunk and excited mob had pushed Sera and Reggie onto the van, where the two of them clenched hands and managed to grab a seat together in the back.

Reggie felt helpless. He could not save her; he had no idea what to do to save her. But he could stay with her, through every second of whatever it was that was going to happen. Reggie was terrified, but he knew he could not let Sera see that. As they huddled together in the rear seat, he put his hands on her shoulders and turned her towards him.

“Sera, I know you are feisty and independent and stubborn as hell. But for right now, play along. I want you to look into my eyes, and keep looking into my eyes, and while we ride together in this stinking bus, on our way to God only knows where, I want you to just start telling me about every pet you can ever remember having. No matter how little it was, if you owned a pet mouse or a pet turtle or even a garden slug--”

“How did you know I had a pet turtle?” she said, her eyes lighting up and her face beaming in that beatific way she had . . . as though she was going to live forever.

“Tell me about the turtle, Sera.”

He stared into her eyes, and wondered if just this once, love would conquer all. Even death.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE:
THE ENDING. (ACTUALLY, THE FIRST ENDING.)
DOWNLOW ON THE UPLOAD

They were seventeen pets into the list when the van pulled into a vacant lot next to a building that was even more dark and foreboding than the previous one, if that was possible. Sera was in a kind of hypnotic trance, as she talked about the pet ferret she had when she was twelve. “His name was Winston. . .” she murmured, as she stared into Reggie’s eyes. Yes, his eyes were hypnotic, Sera thought as she stared, that was the word. Hypnotic. Also, they were so soothing.

And then, they could soothe no more. The mob pushed out of the van; again Sera and Reggie found themselves inside of a dank, abandoned warehouse. The men all knew the routine, they lined up around a couple of kegs and handed cash over. The place was awash with beer, and everybody was in a grand mood, awaiting the carnage of the dog fights. More cash exchanged hands as bets were placed.

“We’ve got to find who’s in charge!” said Sera.

But Reggie was in a deeper panic. He was a wreck about the time.

“Sera. This is getting serious. Listen, I need you to come with me. Follow me, no matter what. Just trust me.”

“Reggie, what are we doing?”

“Sera, do you trust me?”

“Yes, of course, but--”

“Then come with me.”

He took her by the hand and they darted through the tipsy, bloodthirsty crowd. Reggie had spied a hallway at the rear of the large room, and he was wondering how he would get the hulking guard who was hovering nearby out of the way--when unexpectedly, the guard problem suddenly took care of itself. There was an announcement that the truck with the dogs had arrived, and the guard moved towards the front door of the building to oversee the unloading. Sera closed her eyes and caught her breath.

“Damn, this is really going to happen, isn’t it, Reggie? I don’t know if I can go through with it--”

“Never mind that right now, come with me.”

Reggie pulled her into the hallway at the back of the room. Nobody noticed the pair; everyone else was focused on the truck outside, and the makeshift dog ring going up inside.

Reggie scanned the hallway and found what he was looking for: a window. He peered out and smiled when he saw the tower.

“Perfect! I should be able to get a signal, no problem.”

Sera watched in disbelief as he pulled a cell phone from inside his high tube sock.

“But the guy with the wand . . .” she stammered.

“What do you think the lunchbox distraction was about? Oldest trick in the book. Also Clint Eastwood. Escape from Alcatraz.”

“You mean, that whole time--”

“You don’t think I really carry a lunchbox at my age, do you?”

Reggie didn’t wait for her answer and quickly dialed 911 on the phone.

Sera listened, astonished, as he gave the information and address to the operator. He listened a moment, nodded, and hung up. He looked at her.

“It should only be a few minutes. Nobody is going to get hurt. No dogs--no people.” Reggie knew that she could not possibly understand the depth of the meaning behind his words.

Sera was still staring at him in disbelief. Suddenly she grabbed him and kissed him. For a long time.

Sirens. The kiss stopped abruptly.

“That was fast,” said Reggie, half to himself, half to Sera, who gripped his hand, terrified. The sirens got closer, louder. Reggie and Sera watched the men in the packed room from their hidden vantage point in the hallway. Every face in the room instantaneously transformed from one of slathering, eager bloodlust to abject terror. It was a safe bet that almost everybody in the room had outstanding warrants.

“Too fast! *It was too fast!* Somebody else must have called them!” said Reggie, suddenly sensing that something was terribly wrong. Precisely *why* the thought of someone else calling the police seemed so dangerous, such a repudiation of his plan, he could not say, but life had been teaching him of late to trust his instincts.

“Sera, c’mon. Come with me, hurry!”

--And just as they were darting past the back row of the throng of thugs, the cops burst in the front door of the abandoned factory, led by none other than--

Buzz McClain.

Sera's fiancé, and flooding in behind him, dozens of police officers, heavily armed. Buzz instantly spotted Sera across the room, and he saw that she was being pulled down a dark hallway by that creepy bespectacled little man he so despised.

"There she is!" Buzz shouted. "Sera! SERA! COME BACK HERE!"

But she was gone. Reggie had pulled Sera by the hand behind a kind of false wall formed by some tall shelves, and dragged her through a door that the rest of the crowd could not see. Buzz swore and pounded his fists; his lip curled back and he looked like an rabid animal. An officer hurried up to Buzz.

"There's a rear entrance to this place. The basement has a door on the other side of the building with steps leading to the street."

Buzz grunted without thanking the officer and darted out the door to his car parked just outside the warehouse.

Meanwhile, Reggie and Sera ran down a long, dark hall to another door that led to a room. As soon as they entered, Sera gagged, and in the dim light of one bare overhead bulb, she could see pools of dried blood where the red fluid had drained from racks and tables towards a central drain in the floor.

"Oh God!" choked Sera, as she leaned over and vomited. She could not tell if those were dog carcasses in the shadows or not. Reggie was fumbling with the heavy metal grate over the drain, struggling to get it up.

"Sera. You have to come with me. No matter how horrible it is down here."

He shimmied down the hole into a labyrinthine passageway.

“We’re in the basement of the building. These places all have walk-up exits. We have to find it.”

Sera cried and gasped and tried not to vomit again as he pulled her along. Her eyes had not deceived her; there did seem to be some kind of skeletal creature remains strewn about.

“Stay strong, Sera! Stay with me. There, I see the door!”

They made their way to it and Reggie pushed it open. They darted up the stairs and out into the street, where in the blink of an eye, they were both run down by Buzz--

--who was speeding his red Corvette down the alley, hunting his disobedient fiancé and that nerdass punk he planned to kill when he finally got his hands on the little creep. Buzz had been going too fast to slow down in time, but he was able to see who he was about to hit, and he was still screaming when his grill hit their bodies and they were thrown several yards, crashing into the brick wall of the building, collapsing together, arm in arm, like some ghastly death tableaux.

But they were not dead.

Buzz rushed from his car to Sera’s body. She was still breathing, barely. Reggie moaned and gurgled. It sounded like a death rattle.

That was when the ambulance came screeching around the corner and into the alley.

“That was fast,” said Buzz, relieved but confused. “Way too fast--” he said to nobody, standing up slowly with a distinct feeling of foreboding.

The EMTs were out of the ambulance in seconds, as soon as it had screeched to a stop. They were professional and equipped, and it seemed like

only a minute or two passed before Reggie and Sera were strapped into gurneys and loaded onto the ambulance, the EMTs completely ignoring Buzz McClain's barrage of questions.

And that was when Buzz noticed that there was something distinctly "off" about these EMTs. And the ambulance. But Buzz could not quite pinpoint what. The ambulance looked official enough, and the EMTs looked normal. But not normal. There was something very peculiar about their eyes. Both guys, thought Reggie. Weird eyes. And they had a strange glow about them.

Still ignoring Buzz's questions--would Sera be OK and which hospital were they going to, and did she need a blood donor, because his dad had connections--the EMTs slammed the door, one staying inside with the mangled pair, the other jumping in the driver's seat. Then they sped off, down the dark alley, as Buzz stood up and brushed himself off.

"Hey guys, that's not the way to the hospital! I SAID, THAT'S NOT THE WAY--"

But the ambulance was long gone, driving further and further away, down the alley and away from the city lights . . . into the pitch black night.

The upload had been kind.

If you could see them, you would swear *it was them*.

And so it was.

The funny little space between her two front teeth that he so adored was still there, although certainly the Unit *could* have been created such that her teeth were perfect.

But perfection was rarely the goal here.

His tic for pushing his horn rims up his nose--his whole need for corrective spectacles, in fact--was intact. He might have opted to change that about his Unit but opting to keep the specs made the transition into the unit feel more natural, less foreign. And even after he had his Unit's vision corrected, he had just never gotten around to getting rid of his glasses.

The entire transition took place during the whole dogfighting kerfuffle, and had happened within the space of a few seconds. The two "paramedics" simply waited until they were in a dark alley, undisturbed, then they flicked a few buttons, and it was done.

There was, of course, a brief transition, followed by an orientation, wherein they had to absorb the strange new truth of where they were. Of *when* they were.

But then it was all fine.

They were together, the two Units, uploaded Reginald and uploaded Seraphim, nearly all the time.

And that was fine.

They spent their days (not that time was measured that way in that place) studying the people on the planet of their original birth, loving the project, and that was all fine.

The rest, I will leave it to you to imagine, since almost anything one imagined in this new world was possible. There are no words in Earthly English to describe how joyous they were to be rid of their fleshy valises--something those legendary Earthlings like Bill Gates and Stephen Hawking had predicted so long ago. No acne, no monthly cramps, no arthritis, no indigestion, no farts, no cancer in a phrase, no expiration date. Hence, the need for, and love of, imagination. Bountiful, sassy, emboldening imagination.

Imagine, then, Sera and Reggie staring at a large screen, about forty feet by sixty feet. An old man was stretched out on his bed, and anybody looking at him could see that he was not well. Precisely *why* a soul might know this about the old man was mystical and could not be defined, but here was the long and short of it: he was dying. A man who looked to be about twenty years younger was holding the man's hand, talking quietly. Mozart played softly in the background.

"I don't want to wait any longer, son," said the old man weakly. "Start the upload."

"Dad, are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Gosh, Dad, I thought I was ready for this. But I don't want to say goodbye yet."

"We've been over this. It's not goodbye. It's 'see you later.' Right, kid?"

"But--"

“Son, do it. Please.”

The young man sighed as he reached over to his laptop and pressed a few keys.

But there was no sadness on Reggie and Sera’s end.

“This is great! I have waited three decades to talk to the professor again!”

“I know, Reg. And think how happy he’ll be when he can give Russell a big bear hug!”

“Sera, it’s gonna be just like old home week!”

“Should we go down to the third floor?”

“Just try and stop me.”

They hurried down the brightly lit corridor and started down the stairs. She stopped him on the stair landing, grabbed him, and planted a big sloppy kiss on him. Units loved that sort of thing. They laughed as they noticed that the Hawking unit canine was trotting behind them, smiling up at them with his endearing underbite--nobody would have dared change that about the dog. Sera beamed at Reggie.

“I love you.” she said.

“I love you.” he said.

Some things, neither time nor space can alter nor diminish.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR:
THE ENDING. (ACTUALLY, THE SECOND ENDING)
LOVE IN THE SEWERS

They were seventeen pets into the list when the van pulled into a vacant lot next to a building that was even more dark and foreboding than the previous one, if that was possible. Sera was in a kind of hypnotic trance, as she talked about the pet ferret she had when she was twelve. “His name was Winston. . .” she murmured, as she stared into Reggie’s eyes. Yes, his eyes were hypnotic, Sera thought as she stared, that was the word. Hypnotic. Also, they were so soothing.

And then, they could not soothe anymore. Again the mob pushed out of the van; again Sera and Reggie found themselves inside of a dank, abandoned warehouse. The men all knew the routine, they lined up around a couple of kegs and handed cash over. The place was awash with beer, and everybody was in a grand mood, awaiting the carnage of the dog fights. More cash exchanged hands as bets were placed.

“We’ve got to find who's in charge!” said Sera.

But Reggie was in a deeper panic. He was a wreck about the time.

“Sera. This is getting serious. Listen, I need you to come with me. Follow me, no matter what. Just trust me.”

“Reggie, what are we doing?”

“Sera, do you trust me?”

“Yes, of course, but--”

“Then come with me.”

He took her by the hand and they darted through the tipsy, bloodthirsty crowd. Reggie had spied a hallway at the rear of the large room, and he was wondering how he would get the hulking guard who was hovering nearby out of the way--when unexpectedly, the guard problem suddenly took care of itself. There was an announcement that the truck with the dogs had arrived, and the guard moved towards the front door of the building to oversee the unloading. Sera closed her eyes and caught her breath.

“Damn, this is really going to happen, isn’t it, Reggie? I don’t know if I can go through with it--”

“Never mind that right now, come with me.”

Reggie pulled her into the hallway at the back of the room. Nobody noticed the pair; everyone else was focused on the truck outside, and the makeshift dog ring going up inside.

Reggie scanned the hallway and found what he was looking for: a window. He peered out and smiled when he saw the tower.

“Perfect! I should be able to get a signal, no problem.”

Sera watched in disbelief as he pulled a cell phone from inside his high tube sock.

“But the guy with the wand . . .” she stammered.

“What do you think the lunchbox distraction was about? Oldest trick in the book. Also Clint Eastwood. Escape from Alcatraz.”

“You mean, that whole time--”

“You don’t think I really carry a lunchbox at my age, do you?”

Reggie didn’t wait for her answer, but quickly dialed 911 on the phone.

Sera listened, astonished, as he gave the information and address to the operator. He listened a moment, nodded, and hung up. He looked at her.

“It should only be a few minutes. Nobody is going to get hurt. No dogs--no people.” Reggie knew that she could not possibly understand the depth of the meaning behind his words.

Sera was still staring at him in disbelief. Suddenly she grabbed him and kissed him. For a long time.

Sirens. The kiss stopped abruptly.

“That was fast,” said Reggie, half to himself, half to Sera, who gripped his hand, terrified. The sirens got closer, louder. Reggie and Sera watched the men in the packed room from their hidden vantage point in the hallway. Every face in the room instantaneously transformed from one of slathering, eager bloodlust to abject terror. It was a safe bet that almost everybody in the room had outstanding warrants.

“Too fast! *It was too fast!* Somebody else must have called them!” said Reggie, suddenly sensing that something was terribly wrong. Precisely *why* the thought of someone else calling the police seemed so dangerous, such a repudiation of his plan, he could not say, but life had been teaching him of late to trust his instincts.

“Sera, c’mon. Come with me, hurry!”

--And just as they were darting past the back row of the throng of thugs, the cops burst in the front door of the abandoned factory, led by none other than--

Buzz McClain.

Sera's fiancé, and flooding in behind him, dozens of police officers, heavily armed. Buzz instantly spotted Sera across the room, and he saw that she was being pulled down a dark hallway by that creepy bespectacled little man he so despised.

"There she is!" Buzz shouted. "Sera! SERA! COME BACK HERE!"

But she was gone. Reggie had pulled Sera by the hand behind a kind of false wall formed by some tall shelves, and dragged her through a door that the rest of the crowd could not see. Buzz swore and pounded his fists; his lip curled back and he looked like a rabid animal. An officer hurried up to Buzz.

"There's a rear entrance to this place. The basement has a door on the other side of the building with steps leading to the street."

Buzz grunted without thanking the officer and darted out the door to his car parked just outside the warehouse.

Meanwhile, Reggie and Sera ran down a long, dark hall to another door that led to a room. As soon as they entered, Sera gagged, and in the dim light of one bare overhead bulb, she could see pools of dried blood where the red fluid had drained from racks and tables towards a central drain in the floor.

"Oh God!" choked Sera, as she leaned over and vomited. She could not tell if those were dog carcasses in the shadows or not. Reggie was fumbling with the heavy metal grate over the drain, struggling to get it up.

"Sera. You have to come with me. No matter how horrible it is down here."

He shimmied down the hole into a labyrinthine passageway.

"We're in the basement of the building. These places all have walk-up exits. We have to find it."

Sera cried and gasped and tried not to vomit again as he pulled her along. Her eyes had not deceived her; there did seem to be some kind of skeletal creature remains strewn about.

“Stay strong, Sera! Stay with me. There, I see the door!”

They made their way to it and Reggie pushed it open, throwing the weight of his body against it. When the door finally burst open, a dozen police and Buzz McClain were there to meet them. Within seconds, uniformed officers were all over Reggie. All Reggie could think about was how the hell could he save Sera if he was arrested? But then again, if she was arrested for some reason, at least, in a police station, she might be safe--

But that was not to be. An officer threw him against a squad car, jerked Reggie’s hands behind his back, and cuffed him. Reggie could only flail helplessly and cry Sera’s name. She cried back for Reggie, as Buzz manhandled her into his car, and sped away into the black night.

Reggie sat handcuffed to the table.

When they brought him into the station house and perp walked him to the dank questioning room, Reggie was so out of his gourd, jumping and gesturing, babbling about this Sera person and how he had to save her life, that they had no choice but to restrain him. He sat with his hand chained to the table like he was some creepy serial killer from a tv show.

“Listen, you gotta let me go. I gotta do this thing. I’ll come back! I swear!”

The detectives laughed appreciatively. The one with the big gut looked at his beanpole partner, as he blew on his coffee to cool it off.

“Did you hear that, Frank? He’ll come back! He swears!”

“I don’t believe I’ve heard that one before, Wally. And I’ve heard them all!”

“Sorry, kid,” said Wally. “We have been looking for you for a long time.”

Reggie tried to throw up his hands in frustration, but they were yanked back down by the chains and he winced.

“Look, just because I have a video of that gypsy’s murder, it doesn’t mean that I killed her.”

The detectives kept snickering.

“He’s got a point, Wally. We’re always seeing snuff films where the guy filming didn’t have a clue what was happening.”

Reggie pounded on the table.

“You know what I mean! I told you, I was across the street, video taping them, when suddenly--”

“Yeah, we heard you. And we don’t believe you. We’re charging you with two murders, pal,” said Frank casually.

Reggie leaned forward, babbling frantically.

“But that tape isn’t evidence!”

“It is to us,” countered Wally. “Kid, what you don’t seem to understand is that those two low lifes actually had friends in very high places. And they’re all screaming for justice, we’ve been trying to get them justice for weeks now, and now we’re gonna give it to them.”

“Those two grifters?” said Reggie in disbelief. “They had friends in high places?”

“They did, sure enough,” said Frank. “You see, as it happens, the gypsy’s boyfriend bouncer was actually the mayor’s very favorite nephew.

Maybe you remember him from when he was a big cheese in those staged fake wrestling matches? ‘Titus, the Tattooed Terror.’ He had a good routine.”

“WWF wrestling isn’t fake, Frank,” muttered Wally. Then he sat on the edge of the table and smiled patronizingly at Reggie. “And it also turns out that the gypsy with the crystal ball had her patrons. She had people who used her services regularly, and they all swore she had ‘the gift’. And now they’re mad she’s gone. Freaked out, you might say. Apparently she was in possession of a lot of very important people’s secrets. Turns out they would go to her on a lark or a whim or a dare--then they would be shocked as hell to find out how much she knew about them! She had to be psychic, they say. The real deal. They swear.”

“Ok, I get it,” said Reggie, trying to manage the situation. “So they have defenders. That has nothing to do with me. You guys say that you know I am guilty because the building is surrounded by cameras, and nobody matching the killer who gunned them down in my video passed by those cameras. So it’s me by process of elimination? As in, somehow I was filming it from a distance, but still managed to be in their apartment, gunning them down?”

“Oh c’mon,” said Frank, rolling his eyes. “That’s a no brainer. Tripod. Autopilot remote.”

“Sure, but then you’re claiming that I managed to leave the area without the cameras seeing me?”

“You could have worn a disguise. Changed while you were in the gypsy’s place. Dumped your bloody clothes,” offered Wally.

“Did you find any clothes that didn’t belong to them?”

“Well, no, but--” stammered Frank.

“Exactly. Those cameras cover all four directions coming from the gypsy’s place, but the city cameras don’t cover every square foot. Much as you guys wish they did. There are blind spots. Blind spots with sewer manholes

nearby, I'm sure of it. Why couldn't the killer just ditch his clothes and the weapon in the sewer? He was clearly wearing a dark jumpsuit; so, obviously, he just takes off the bloody jumpsuit. And underneath, he looks like any other schlub walking down the city streets."

Frank and Wally looked at each other.

"Well . . ." muttered Frank, drumming his hands on the table. "I suppose it's possible."

"It's the only explanation," said Reggie, "And I'm betting I can find it!"

"You mean, you think you can find a piece of clothing buried somewhere in miles and miles of runny sewer waste?" asked Wally.

"I have no choice."

Wally leaned back, looking first at Reggie, then at Frank. Reggie could see they were considering it.

"How about it, detectives?"

"You're seriously offering to search the sewers?" asked Frank.

"Yes."

"The shit filled sewers, for as many miles as it takes, till you find this 'evidence' that's trapped somewhere in a massive pile of poop?" said Wally.

"Yes, and I need to get started. Because I need to get out of here. I need to rescue her. Or die with her."

"Screwball. You belong in the sewers. OK, Frank, let's uncuff him."

A couple of minutes later, Reggie found himself in the back of a squad car, en route to the sewers closest to the dead gypsy's lair.

However ghastly you imagine that sewer to smell, it smelled worse. Far worse than that. It smelled of waste and offal and feculence. It smelled of sickness and addiction and excretions. It smelled of despair and dashed dreams, of secrets and shame, of vomit and death. If the stench of all the battlefields from all the wars were bottled, this would be the essence of that scent. If the worst sadistic snuff porn you find on the dark web had a smell, this would be it. Damn, did those sewers stink.

But love conquers all, or so they say, and after a couple of hellish hours, the miracle came. Reggie found the clothing. And the weapon. Mercifully, they were caught in a mangled pile of wire mesh; had it not been trapped in the metal mess, who knows how many miles of sewer he would have had to traverse.

He popped his head up through the nearest personhole, knowing a cop would be there. It wasn't likely that they were going to let him roam the sewers unmonitored, lest he escape to some stinky freedom. He was a double murder suspect, after all. But of course, nobody went into the actual sewers with him; placing a guard at every hole seemed like the best plan.

Reggie was out of the sewer in a matter of seconds, not so much to get away from the stench, but rather because he had no time to lose, if he was going to save Sera--or, what seemed more likely--to be there for her, in the last, waning, moments of her life

Meanwhile, in this moment, the cop and everybody on the street just stopped and stared at Reggie, who was covered in shit and stank to high heaven.

“Well? *Well?*” bellowed Reggie to Frank and Wally, who were both unfazed. They had let him shower--nay, insisted he shower--as soon as he was brought back to the station. Twenty minutes later, Reggie found himself handcuffed to the table again, while Wally and Frank watched a swamp rugby game on a tiny television watch. They chuckled at the players’ antics.

“I went to a swamp rugby championship once, and man oh man, did we have a blast!” said Wally.

“Really?” said Frank. “I’d kill for tickets.”

“Funny, cuz I did, that’s how we got them. Right over the alligator pit. What seats!”

“GUYS!” yelled Reggie. “How long is this going to take? DNA testing is instantaneous these days, am I right?”

“DNA testing may be, but Cecil isn’t. That new deli is opening today on 9th & Claiborne, and Cecil always takes his time at a deli opening.”

“Cripes! How many times do I have to tell you, somebody’s life--”

“--is at stake, we know. You’ve told us. About a thousand times.”

Suddenly the door to the dank little room opened, and a man entered. In one hand, he had a plastic packet filled with clothing. In the other, a partially eaten Reuben.

“The kid’s exonerated,” said Cecil, opening the package of clothing.

“You’re lucky, kid. This jumpsuit matches the one that the guy was wearing in your little home movie. Plus, the DNA is in our system. Turns out, guys, the DNA belongs to that little homunculus hitman, ‘Pompeii Paloma’.”

“*Pompeii Paloma?*” queried Reggie, mystified in spite of his manic state.

“Adult acne.” said Wally. “Sad.”

“His actual name is Vincenzo Paloma. Works for the mob,” said Wally.

“Maybe the gypsy knew too much about the wrong person,” mused

Frank, taking the dark jumpsuit out of the package. All the fecal matter on the jumpsuit had dried out, and it only reeked a little. Cecil nodded and left, more interested in his sandwich than the case.

“I guess we gotta cut the kid loose,” muttered Wally.

“YAH THINK?” bellowed Reggie. He had pulled the jumpsuit on over his clothes. It was about six sizes too small. The pants ended at his knees, the sleeves at his elbows.

Wally and Frank eyed him, nodding.

“That’d just about fit Pompeii,” said Wally. “He’s a short guy.”

“He’s a munchkin,” said Frank. “I always figured it was his Napoleon complex that made him such an overachiever in the murder department.”

“Yeah. Probably so.”

Reggie was yanking off the jumpsuit.

“So can I go now, for Pete’s sake?”

“First, paperwork. Maybe ten minutes. Relax your crack.”

Frank got up to leave.

“I’ll go see if we know anything about Pompeii’s whereabouts. I’ll put out some feelers.”

Wally nodded, thought for a moment, and ran to the door, shouting at Frank down the hall.

“Tell them to also search by the name ‘Vinnie Vesuvius’. He also goes by that!”

Reggie rolled his eyes. Wally turned back to Reggie, smiling.

“Sorry about all this confusion, kid. Wanna watch the end of the swamp rugby game?”

Reggie just scowled at them, grabbed his jacket, and ran from the room.

Reggie was so anxious to get out of the police station and find Sera that he accidentally collided with two policemen who were turning the corner in the hall.

“Hey buddy! What the--”

“You little pissant--”

Both cops lunged at the fleeing form, ready to hassle him, but their captain came around the corner just as they grabbed Reggie.

“Let him go.”

The cops bristled as Reggie squirmed.

“I said LET HIM GO! I’ll explain later.”

And Reggie was gone.

When he stepped out into the sunshine, the first thing he did was reach for his phone in the packet of personal possessions that the precinct clerk had given him just moments before. He cursed to himself when he saw it was dead. He pulled a cord out of the packet, plugged it into the phone, then plugged the other end into a small electronics port in his skin, just behind his ear.

It was always tough to do this without a mirror, the plug being so small and the size of the port so tiny, but he preferred having his body charger hidden behind his hair. If you were stupid enough to have it embedded in your wrist or some other obvious place, strangers were always bothering you in public, asking if they could grab a quick charge. They could become particularly aggressive if they saw that you were sitting somewhere relaxing. Granted, without a person being in motion, it always took a little longer for the human body to charge a device. But passing strangers (in a world that seemed to become ruder by the hour) always seemed to feel entitled to your personal corporal voltage if you were not in motion. All you were doing was just sitting

around, reading a book or drinking a coffee, they figured, what the hell was the big problem grabbing a charge from you? Never mind that it left you feeling a bit weakened for a few minutes, gimme your juice now! Not a week went by that you didn't hear about somebody being mugged, held down, and having some wire forced into him, just so some jagoff could charge his padlet.

That was why Reggie ducked into a darkened alcove to charge his phone; the last thing he needed was to be waylaid and roughed up by strangers.

The phone had not been plugged in for thirty seconds before it rang. Reggie recognized the number and grabbed it.

“Professor--”

“Where the hell are you kid, for pete's sake, this is the day--”

“You think I don't know that? YOU THINK I DON'T KNOW THAT? I got arrested, Doc, and I just got out of jail!”

“You? How the hell--forget it, kid, we don't have time for that. Listen, when you never showed up last night, I got frantic so I went to her apartment building so I could keep an eye on her. And buddy, listen--she's not going to a party at her future father-in-law's estate, like she told you. She's going to a party on her fiance's new yacht. I heard him say something about that was her surprise.”

“Oh God, doc, those drowning dreams I've been having . . .”

“I know, I know. Listen, are you still at the police station? Because I can be there in three minutes. Four tops.”

“But how--”

“I borrowed a bike.”

“No way, nobody can peddle that fast.”

“Christ kid, get a life. I'm homeless, not helpless. I still got some game.”

And with that, the professor hung up. Reggie was stunned. He looked around, realizing he was now a block from the rear entrance to the sprawling police station. He jogged back towards the building and through the parking lot, dodging official police vehicles that tried to maneuver around him. Cops in cars all gave him the stink eye, and looked like they were ready to re-arrest him for acting like a lunatic and endangering lives right here at the police station. But Reggie was too quick for them, and the cops had eaten far too many donuts. They drove away, flipping Reggie the bird. Reggie was doubled over and out of breath by the time he reached the front of the station. He even thought at that moment that he might faint. The phone charger was still plugged in behind his ear, draining his energy--he thought he might need his phone to save her life, although how the hell he was going to do that, he had no idea.

And then he heard it--the roar of a motorcycle. Reggie whirled around. It was the professor, who suddenly seemed to bear an amazing resemblance to Steve McQueen in "The Great Escape", only with a slight beard. It was cool. In the midst of all his terror and frantic worry, he thought the professor looked cool. He did have game, after all.

"Well. Jump on, kid. What are you waiting for, a tattoo?"

Reggie jumped on, and they were off. And without exchanging any words, Reggie knew where they were heading: the docks.

The air smelled badgood--of saltwater and freedom, oil and old fish, adventure and escape. The professor pulled up to a shed on the docks, jumped off, and talked to a man he seemed to know. The bike got wheeled into a shed and padlocked; then Reggie saw the man pointing down the pier to the last dock in the row. The professor gestured to Reggie, and the two of them began running to the place where the man had pointed. They were both ridiculously

out of place, sprinting past a long row of gorgeous white yachts, and swarms of gorgeous white people.

Reggie and the professor stopped, both out of breath.

“Crap. My body can feel that I gave up Pilates,” moaned the professor as he scanned the dock. “Him. That guy. He looks like he’s in charge.”

And the professor was gone before Reggie could catch up. It took only a couple of seconds head start for the professor to find out what he needed to know. He turned to Reggie, who was panting like a racing greyhound.

“Sorry, kid. He says the McClain kid and the party all took off in his new yacht about a half hour ago. They must have gone to the dock right around the time I was calling you. Damn. I didn’t think they’d all be ready to leave so fast.”

But Reggie could not think, he could not process, he could not help formulate a plan. All he could do was remember those dreams, night after night after night, of his sweet angel drowning in a swirl of aquamarine water. His brain was paralyzed. He had never experienced anything like this before. He could hear the professor talking to the swarthy man who seemed to be in charge of this dock.

And then, something snapped Reggie out of his haze. He saw something golden glinting in the sun.

It was the professor’s gold pocket watch. His beautiful, priceless golden pocket watch. It dangled back and forth on its chain as the professor tempted the pierman with it, and when it caught the sun, it was almost blinding. Reggie realized what was happening, and he could only stammer.

“But Professor, that’s your--you said--your son, your boy, he was supposed to--when he comes back to you--”

The professor turned and stared at Reggie.

“Yes. And my boy would definitely want me to do this. I know my kid.”

Within seconds, the transaction was complete, and the professor was grabbing Reggie and dragging him towards a battered but handsome speedboat.

“You know how to handle one of these, Professor?”

“Yeah. I’ve always lived landlocked, but when I was at Liberty University, they used to do those reenactments of the disciples as fishermen and Christ calming the storms and all that. Anyway, the state required that they have a certified rescue squad on the ready--and they always, always needed them. Guess whose job it was to rescue the son of God and his love squad when the miracles weren’t all that miraculous?”

“Oh. You never told me that story.”

They were climbing into the boat and the professor was frantically doing all kinds of technical and mysterious things while Reggie watched, helpless and grateful. The professor was chuckling to himself.

“Yeah, well, kid, there’s a lot of stories I’ve never told you. It was when Christ walked on the water that I always had to go into high gear. They had some fake plan about stepping stones they’d placed just under the surface, but, well, the best laid plans--”

“Professor, how do we find them? How do I find Sera?”

“With these,” the professor said, grabbing the satchel he carried with him everywhere. He reached in and pulled out a sleek pair of expensive binoculars. Newcons. Reggie was impressed.

“Wow. Expensive. Professor, how did you--never mind.”

“The pierman said that Buzz McClain’s fancy new yacht has sails that are red, white, and blue, with stars, so at least we’ll know it if we see it. It’s been twenty minutes now, a half hour? This speed boat surely can catch up

with their boat. Pierman said he overheard them say they were going to party on the islands.”

Reggie was already scanning the horizon with the binoculars.

“Think we can catch up with them, Professor?”

Eventually. When they get to whatever island they’re going to.”

“But dammit, we don’t have time for ‘eventually’, Professor.”

“I know. That’s why--I have a plan.”

“What? WHAT? My brain never had such freeze before, Professor, what the hell do we do to save her?”

“Call the cops. Their boats are faster than anyone’s. Between the drug runners and the migrants, the police have beefed up their fleet like nobody’s business. Get your phone.”

“But what do I tell them? They’re not going to just jump because I--”

“I still have some clout. I’m technically still a highly respected professor from Liberty University, just on sabbatical is all. I’ll tell them that I happen to know some students who are out to pick up some drugs and if they stop that boat, they’ll have a big bust on their hands and they’ll get some nice fat headlines.”

But Reggie and the professor did not even need the aid of the police; the pierman had been right. Five minutes on the water at a hundred miles per hour on the speedboat, and they had already caught up with Buzz McClain and his bacchanalian party; they could see the yacht with its red, white, and blue sail, way off in the distance. Instinctively, the professor brought the speed boat to a floating stop.

“Good call,” said Reggie. “If you have powerful binoculars, it’s a sure bet Buzz McClain does too--”

The professor finished Reggie’s thought, as happened so often.

“And if he sees a boat rushing up on him, and looks through those binoculars, and sees that it is you, coming to rescue Sera. . .”

Enough said. Reggie was staring through the binoculars at the yacht. His eyes widened at what he saw through the binoculars.

“Oh my God, how strange is that? Sera is sitting there all alone by the stern, just feeding the seagulls, and it looks like everybody else is down inside the cabin. What's up with that?”

The professor had a theory.

“They're probably all down by his television, watching the ivy league scrimmages. They're playing the final blowout this weekend. Those preseason scrimmages are becoming as big as the Harvard-Yale game itself. In fact, I'm surprised they aren't all there today.”

“Well I don't know about that,” replied Reggie, “All I know is that it's supposed to be her big birthday celebration, and everybody's ignoring her, and she's sitting there by herself. That's not right. And she looks so sad--”

Before Reggie could finish his thought, a sudden gust of wind came from nowhere, perhaps from hell itself, far in the distance, and caused the boom to swing around and knock Sera off the boat and into the water.

“Oh, God, no!” screamed Reggie in horror, and within seconds, the professor had started the engine again, and they were hurtling towards the yacht at an ever-increasing speed. It was the sound of the approaching powerboat engine, and not Sera's accident, that finally brought the drunk crowd of partiers out of the cabin, to see what all the noise and yelling was about. Meanwhile, back in the powerboat, Reggie had already stripped himself of his baggy jeans and shoes, and was preparing to dive into the spot where Sera had fallen in.

Reggie had said he would save Sera, or die with her, no matter what. And now, the moment was upon him. If he was to be true to his word, it would happen in the next few minutes. The next few seconds.

Reggie dove. His swimming was clumsy and awkward, but he did not have to swim far to get to the rising bubbles and flailing water. Then he dove deep again. He descended through the sheer power of panic, heroism, and love propelling him down to the depths where his darling was dying.

The water had roused Sera back to consciousness, but her body was too battered to swim. He could feel her grabbing for him, then pulling at him--and in that moment, so strong was the force of her pulling that he did not know if she was struggling to be saved, or if the ocean was struggling to win them both, as it had won so many times in the past . . . as it had taken so many sailors, and so many land-lovers...down to the briney deep. It was as though the ocean needed to be fed by the very life force that had crawled from it so many eons ago. He did not imagine that she could be so strong, but she was winning. The ocean was winning. The seconds turned to minutes, the oxygen was slipping from his body, first slowly, and then faster and faster, as their struggle became more frantic.

Reggie knew that if he just let go now and swam to the surface, he would be saved, he could save himself. He still had the ability to save himself. But in saving himself, oh, he would be lost forever. There was no life without Sera! Reggie knew in that moment that he was going to die. That he had to die. Countless poets and bards and and knights and highwaymen and kings and commoners, for hundreds of years, since time immemorial, had sworn that they would die for love. But now, it was Reggie who was being put to the test.

And then . . . just as strangely as it had started, it ended. All of the oxygen was gone from both of their bodies, and they both began to float down,

down, down, into the ocean deep, into legend, into the makings of a really good rock 'n roll love ballad.

Back on the surface, people had frantically pulled off shoes and jackets and jumped into the water, thinking they might save the pair. They dove desperately down into the depths, flailing and diving until they got their hands on Reggie and Sera.

But Buzz McClain did not dive. He stood frozen on the deck, staring in disbelief, the party drugs hitting him hard, as he envisioned some completely other harmless folly taking place: he was swaying by the bow of his sailboat, lost in some far back halcyon hour in time. . . he thought he was at a Harvard synchronized swimming competition. He was flashing back to the first date he had ever gone on with Sera, sitting on the bleachers with her next to the Olympic grade pool. Buzz was moving and moaning on the bow, oblivious of the crisis, and he was remembering what it was like to fondle Sera's thighs, to amble his fingers easily up her shorts, while they both watched her synchronized swimmer roommate thrusting her thighs out of the water artfully, along with a host of other mermaids, as they splashed in pool water the color of a blue topaz . . .

Suddenly the bodies of Reggie and Sera were being dragged out of the water. Two ivy leaguers who were pre-med were doing all they could: CPR, resuscitation, the whole deal. But they were gone. Reggie and Sera were dead.

The professor realized what had happened to his friend, and with the loss of this second son, he was crushed. Reggie, this son by brain if not by blood, was gone. Buzz McClain knew that he would garner some truly horrific headlines. And everybody else knew that a really good party had been spoiled by ridiculous tragedy.

But this is not their story; this is the story of Reggie and his beloved. So now, let's wrap it up.

PUNARJANMAN

Or

STRAY CAT STRUT

He pushed through the brush and stared at the tiger lying lifeless on the ground. Then he stared even longer at the woman with the gun. She looked up and saw him, startled and angry.

“Who the hell are you?” she asked, but she did not raise her weapon.

“I’m just . . . uh . . .” stammered Remington nervously.

But not that nervously. He could see that the gun was only a dart gun. Presumably, he was in no real danger. Not from the massive cat. Not from the diminutive woman.

She stamped her foot.

“I said, why are you following me? ANSWER ME!”

Well. He might be in *a bit* of danger. From her temper. He held up his camera and smiled.

“I’m a photographer. That is, I’m actually a scientist. Photography is more of a hobby. I’m doing a story on endangered species. I noticed you in the jungle this morning, and I’ve been tracking you.”

He studied her face. Her anger had faded. She was still staring at him, but with a very perplexed look. It was as though . . . Remington thought to himself . . . as though she was trying to *place* him.

“Nobody is supposed to know about this,” she said hesitantly. “That is, the governments that are involved with tigers--well, let’s just say they have their own motives.”

“Greed?”

“Something like that.”

“I would never do anything like that. I just want to take as many pictures as I can, before they’re all--” He couldn’t say the words.

“Extinct?” she asked. He nodded. She took a step towards him.

“Well, we have a plan,” she offered, “And I assume you know by now, the tiger is not dead. Just asleep. Oh, by the way, my name is Phoenix. I know, I know. Very pretentious. You have to know my parents. Which is impossible, because they were both killed in . . . But whatever, anyway, all my friends just call me ‘Finny’, OK?”

Remington took a step towards her.

“Pleased to meet you, Finny. And I, by the way, am Remington. But all my friends just call me Rimmie.”

“Remington?” she murmured. He studied her. It was almost as though she thought he had given her the wrong name.

“Uhm, if it makes any difference, I’m named after some old English estate by the Thames. Not the gun guys. This is the only weapon I’ve ever shot with.”

He held up his camera, in a lame joke. She crinkled her nose at him.

“Have we met, Rimmie? I feel as though we have.”

“No. No ma’am. Because I surely would have remembered you.”

“And yet I could swear--”

“Look,” said Rimmie, “If you want nobody to ever know that I ever saw you, or that cat, I can arrange that too. Publishing pictures of wildlife, or what’s left of it, is forbidden in most countries, I guess we both know that. It

just stirs up the activists. But if you want to change how these governments think and act, I can get these pictures to where they will really make a difference. I don't like to brag, but changing the way governments function, because me and my merry band bust them wide open, is kind of what I do. And pictures go a long way. My grandfather was actually a photographer for National Geographic."

"Really!" she said, lighting up. "My grandfather was so proud of his National Geographic collection. He was one of a handful of people in the world who own every copy they ever printed. That is, until the poor man lost it all, when. . . in the. . ."

"The Great Purge? Because that was how my parents died."

"Yes. The year 2029, the very beginning of the purge. And my grandfather was one of its first victims--because he had been fighting against The President Rex for so long. Family legend has it he even pissed on the President's grave."

She chuckled. Remmie was thrilled that he could make her smile. Suddenly she looked nervous again. Remmie wanted to touch her, to reassure her. But he knew he couldn't. Not yet. Instead, he smiled his best casual grin.

"Not to pry--I know this is a secret mission--but what exactly are you going to do with a four hundred pound cat that won't be noticed?"

There was a rustling in the bushes. A dark skinned young man came through the brush.

"We've got that handled," he said brusquely.

Remmie looked nervous again. This man's gun looked real. The pretty lady saw the fear in Remmie's eyes.

"Oh--sorry. Uh, Remmie, this is Akintunde. He's my guide, and my translator, and my friend. Sort of the brother I never had."

And when the young man saw Phoenix relax, he also let his guard down a bit. But he did not take his eyes off Rennie.

“Is he safe?”

Finny looked at Rennie for a moment, then winked at him.

“Yes, Kindie. He’s no threat.”

Rennie blushed a little, then looked at this young man.

“ ‘Akintunde?’ That’s Yoruban, isn’t it. Means ‘bravery’, doesn’t it – oh wait, I remember. It means ‘return of bravery.’”

Akintunde smiled, caught off guard.

“How would you know something like that?”

“Haven’t the faintest idea, it’s just something I know.”

Finny got down on her knees and petted the tiger. “Kindie, I think you had better call your dad. That helicopter should be here by now.”

“On it.”

Akintunde took a phone from his field bag and dialed, then stepped away from the two to talk. Rennie knelt down beside Finny, and he could feel her aura swirling into his. She put her hand on his arm.

“Can you really take our story global? Get the truth out? About the last of the tigers? And elephants? And all the rest?”

“Yes I can, Finny. I’ve done it many times before. That’s what I do. That’s why the change is coming. That’s why the power brokers are so crazy. The rebellion is everywhere now.”

“And it’s right here. Saving this cat. We are going to impregnate this young lady with frozen male tiger sperm, and start repopulating the planet with grand, glorious queen-of-the-jungle tigers.”

“Bad news for jungle mice?”

Finny looked into Rennie’s eyes.

Finny looks deep into Rennie's eyes.

She is still trying to place him. She steps closer, then reaches out and gently touches his face.

“I have this vision of you in the rain. A terrible rain storm. Rescuing me from something, but I don't know what. Or wait--not me--you are rescuing some creature. Not this creature . . . some other creature, in terrible distress. But not here, no place like this. Not a jungle or even a forest. More like a concrete jungle. There are skyscrapers all around us, as the storm rages, and there are big cars, speeding by. But I have never been in such a city, in all my life. Only here, in this jungle.”

“And I have a vision of you . . . in the water. A terrible accident. Rescuing you from drowning. I am holding you in my arms, swimming with you towards safety. But I have never held you in my arms. Not in this life. For that is something I would never, ever forget. Not in this life, or the next, or the next.”

As they are about to kiss, Akintunde returns.

“The professor is on the phone. He's sending the chopper and the crew. Wants to talk to you, though.”

As he hands Finny the phone, she whispers to Rennie.

“Technically, the professor is my boss, but he is also Akintunde's dad. I've known him forever. He's like the father I never had.”

Then, Finny speaks into the phone.

Many miles away, the professor talks into the phone. He has a crazy shock of red, unkempt hair and beard. He has skin the color of buttermilk and a constellation of freckles. His wife, a tall, spellbinding Yoruban woman stands nearby, fixing drinks. The professor says something into the phone.

Back in the jungle clearing, with the sleeping cat at her feet, Finny listens, then grins.

“Yes, Professor. He’s safe. In fact, he’s better than safe. He could be our savior. He’s got a plan.”

She listens some more, then smiles and looks over at Rennie.

“Yes, as a matter of fact I do. I know him from before.”

She hangs up and smiles at Rennie. Akintude turns his attention to the sleeping cat. As she and Rennie are about to kiss again, the moment is cut by the whirring of chopper blades. The massive metal bird settles down in the clearing, just a few yards away. Rennie looks at the pilot and does a double take.

“WOW,” is all he says. Finny, too, is gobsmacked. She looks at Rennie, and then at the pilot, and shakes her head in amazement.

“WOW is right. That guy could be your identical twin.”

THE END

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE:
AND FINALLY ...THE THIRD ENDING

... But Reggie and the professor did not even need the aid of the police; the pierman had been right. Five minutes on the water at a hundred miles per hour on the speedboat and they had already caught up with Buzz McClain and his bacchanalian party; they could see the yacht with its red, white, and blue sail, way off in the distance. Instinctively, the professor brought the speed boat to a floating stop.

“Good call,” said Reggie. “If you have powerful binoculars, it’s a sure bet Buzz McClain does too--”

The professor finished Reggie’s thought, as happened so often.

“And if he sees a boat rushing up on him, and looks through those binoculars, and sees that it is you, coming to rescue Sera. . .”

Enough said. Reggie was staring through the binoculars at the yacht. His eyes widened at what he saw through the binoculars.

“Oh my God, how strange is that? Sera is sitting there all alone by the stern, just feeding the seagulls, and it looks like everybody else is down inside the cabin. What's up with that?”

The professor had a theory.

“They're probably all down by his television, watching the ivy league scrimmages. They're playing the final blowout this weekend. Those preseason scrimmages are becoming as big as the Harvard-Yale game itself. In fact, I'm surprised they aren't all there today.”

“Well I don't know about that,” replied Reggie, “All I know is that it's supposed to be her big birthday celebration, and everybody's ignoring her, and she's sitting there by herself. That's not right. And she looks so sad--”

Before Reggie could finish his thought, a sudden gust of wind came from nowhere, perhaps from hell itself, far in the distance, and caused the boom to swing around and knock Sera off the boat and into the water.

“Oh, God, no!” screamed Reggie in horror, and within seconds, the professor had started the engine again, and they were hurtling towards the yacht at an ever-increasing speed. It was the sound of the approaching powerboat engine, and not Sera's accident, that finally brought the drunk crowd of partiers out of the cabin, to see what all the noise and yelling was about. Meanwhile, back in the powerboat, Reggie had already stripped himself of his baggy jeans and shoes, and was preparing to dive into the spot where Sera had fallen in.

Reggie had said he would save Sera, or die with her, no matter what. And now, the moment was upon him. If he was to be true to his word, it would happen in the next few minutes. The next few seconds.

Reggie dove. His swimming was clumsy and awkward, but he did not have to swim far to get to the rising bubbles and flailing water. Then he dove deep again. He descended through the sheer power of panic, heroism and love, propelling him down to the depths where his darling was dying. The water had roused Sera back to consciousness, but her body was too battered to swim. He could feel her grabbing for him, then pulling at him--and in that moment, so

strong was the force of her pulling that he did not know if she was struggling to be saved, or if the ocean was struggling to win them both, as it had won so many times in the past as it had taken so many sailors, and so many land-lovers, deep down to the briney deep. It was as though the ocean needed to be fed by the very life force that had crawled from it so many eons ago. Reggie did not imagine that she could be so strong, but she was winning. The ocean was winning. The seconds turned to minutes, the oxygen was slipping from his body, first slowly, and then faster and faster, as their struggle became more frantic.

And that was when it happened. Just in the nick of time, Reggie felt a hand on his shirt collar, pulling him up. The professor was suddenly imbued with the incredible strength of spirit and muscle wrought by a man who was in that moment still haunted and guilt ravaged by the loss of his own missing and lost son. His strength became superhuman, Herculean, and thus, the professor's "second son", by brain if not by blood, was saved. When Reggie, still hanging on to Sera for dear life, finally got a chance to turn his head, he saw that the professor was holding onto a rope with the other hand, and the orchestrated muscles back on the yacht were pulling them to safety.

The professor broke to the surface first. He grabbed at the hands struggling to pull him aboard, then another set of hands pulled Reggie, who was still clinging to Sera, out of the water.

But Sera was not flailing. She was as limp and gray-green as the seaweed that clung to her. She was as dead as Ophelia.

But nobody was giving up on her. Two pre-med students went to work on her, applying CPR and trying their best to resuscitate her. Minutes seemed like hours, but it was not five hours. Only five hellish minutes. And Reggie,

trembling in a towel and crouched in the fetal position, could see what nobody else could see: the numbers, today's date, flashing over her head in the bloodiest of reds, even though there was nary a drop of blood anywhere on her person. Reggie hung his head and wept. He did not have the strength of spirit to raise his head and watch the tragic chaos. Medical students pressing on her chest, a couple of random girls praying, the professor alternating between watching the motionless Sera and studying the God forsaken Reggie.

Finally, they stopped. Finally, they all accepted what Reggie had, in the darkest part of his heart, known to be true. To be ineluctable and unavoidable. She was gone. Sera was gone. The most alive person that Reggie had ever met in his life was dead. Reggie knew what nobody else could see: the numbers were now gone.

Some young weeping man, one of the pre-med students, put his ear to her chest. He looked up at the trembling people crowded round and shook his head.

“She's gone.”

For a moment, nobody moved. A few muttered quietly the kinds of religious phrases that seem vaguely appropriate, if not the least bit comforting, at moments such as these. Reggie was still crouched in a ball, but he felt the anger welling up within him. The professor sensed this, and ran to the kid's side, grabbing him and hugging him hard.

“Professor, she's gone. I mean I knew--we saw--but I just can't believe she's gone.”

And indeed he did not have to believe that she was gone, for just at that moment, Sera began sputtering and coughing. The pre-meds were back at her side again, ushering her back to consciousness.

But Reggie pushed them away, because all he knew in that moment was that he wanted to embrace her and never let her go.

Twenty minutes later, he had in fact let go of her, but only so she could take some full, deep breaths. Buzz McClain--vaguely out of it for the whole preceding drama, had actually been stupid enough to open a bottle of champagne, the professor and Reggie being careful to make sure Sera did not imbibe. The police had arrived, and with them, an EMT, who checked the patient out and confirmed what everybody knew: Sera would be fine. From the tone and tenor of her sassing, it was clear that Sera would soon be her old self.

Even Reggie had relaxed a little. Everybody was communing in the joy of the moment and the beauty of the setting sun.

"She's one lucky lady," said the pre-med student of the bunch.

"Lucky?" sputtered Reggie.

"How so, kid?" asked the professor, "Seeing as how she got conked on the head and nearly drowned in the ocean?"

"Well, that's the thing. Sera was actually clinically dead for a few minutes there."

Suddenly Reggie and the professor both froze, and stared at the pre-med kid.

"Clinically dead?" The professor stammered the words, seeking clarification.

“As in, *dead* dead?” asked Reggie.

“No vitals. So yeah, dead.”

Reggie and the professor looked at each other and both whooped at the same time. They hugged each other hard and close, then split apart like atoms and waved their hands in the air, yelling “*She was dead! She was dead!* Wohooooo!”

Meanwhile, Sera just stared at the both of them and scowled.

Later, as their relationship deepened into something more beautiful than either of them could have imagined, Reggie was going to be held accountable to Sera for this bizarre demonstration. In the words of the immortal Ricky Ricardo, he had “some ‘splainin’ ” to do.

P.S. And for what it’s worth, the numbers did not come back. They never came back.

DENOUEMENT

The rest of this 100 percent true fable reads like your typical love story, assuming of course that your typical romance includes supernatural powers and a love that is stronger than time and space. Throughout the rest of that Strange Day, and even into the night, Sera took Reggie's hand, and she never let go; they looked into each other's eyes for a long moment, and then they looked together into the future, and they never looked back.

Exactly what happened to the two of them is somewhat shrouded in mystery, although I was fortunate enough to be told part of their story, and it

was told to me by them directly, although I was not invited to go to their home, wherever that might be.

I can tell you this much--that they got married and had a family. And that they were very happy. As for the obvious burning question: it would seem that Reggie's encounter with the deep blue sea, and the mystery of near death, had washed away his ability to see the date of your death--the date of anybody's death, in fact. And so he did not know when the date of Sera's true death would be, nor did he have any idea how long his precious children would live. Like every other parent who has ever walked the planet, he had to take the whole thing one day at a time. While praying for their future.

It is worth noting that in the course of his research, Reggie learned that (just as the professor had predicted) he was not the only one on the planet who had been suddenly and mystically granted this power. Other legends and secret stories emerged, but happily, these powers were never harnessed by any government. They seemed to wax and wane, having their small ripple effect on humankind, and it was almost always for the good.

And speaking of the professor, it is worth noting that he disappeared with Reggie. I can tell you this much, the two are still close. But you may find it amusing to learn exactly *why* the professor disappeared so suddenly and completely, the way he did. (After all, up to this time, he had been content to live publicly and even proudly under the overpass in a camp full of hobos.)

Suffice it to say that his disappearance is apparently directly connected to the emergence of a drone. It was a drone that literally rose up out of the dirt, met with another drone, and then they both collided in mid-air, right over the head of our country's tyrannical leader, mid-speech. The effect of these weaponized drones colliding was a spectacular burst of flames which rained down upon Rex, and turned him into a rather magnificent, dare we say it, orange fireball in death, just as he had been in life.

It is also worth noting that at the same time that this happened, a small remote control plane, no bigger than a squirrel, a kind of a one-man mini Cessna, flew over the crowd, and it was dragging along through the sky one of those banners that is usually used to announce the opening of a restaurant, or to publicly propose marriage by some nervous lad anxiously watching his beloved's reaction.

But this small plane did not carry an advertisement, nor a question, but rather, a statement of explanation: "GUY FAWKES IS DEAD! A PENNY FOR THE OLD GUY!"

And somewhere, a heartbroken and grieving father, hoping that his runaway son would read it, or read of it in the viral world, watched prayerfully.

I can tell you this: the professor and his son were reunited. The pocket watch was gifted from father to son, as promised; the pierman had apparently been very cool about selling it back to The Professor. And there is much more to his story, but he politely insists that's none of your business.

So.

Reggie lived happily ever after, and the professor lived happily ever after, and their families lived happily ever after, albeit in a world that was increasingly troubled and full of disaster. But—BUT . . . It was also full of sightings of Russell, full of the sightings of ghosts and ancestors and angels: planetwide, everywhere in the world, all over this sweet, dirty earth.

In fact, the worse things got in the world, the more angels were sighted.

This heralds the end of Ending Number Three.

EPILOGUE

It is only natural that some of you may be asking yourselves the obvious question: three grand, (or not-so-grand) finales? What actually did happen to our heroes and our heroine? Which picture in the triptych should I take as truth? Which is the real end of the story?

The answer is this: they are all the real, true ending, Dear Readers.

Welcome to the Multiverse.