

the
Chronicalia

Peter Ignatius

Cover Illustration By:
Peter Ignatius

Illustrations By:
Justin Evans

bwish.com

for claire

A note from the author:



You've somehow managed, beyond hope, to find a copy of these collected works. These were written anywhere from years ago to days ago, so forgive me if the early works are immature and the later works are irreverent. Finally, forgive me if they are different.

Try not to get carried away. Some of these works are experimental, or strange, or plain, or simply crazy. Forgive them for what they are. Don't take them too much to heart or read too deeply (or for that matter too lightly). Most of all, and above all, enjoy them, for they are all (in my humble opinion) entertaining in some shape, way or form.

It just might make your day. But don't blame me if it doesn't.

A note from the illustrator:



BWISH, gorsh and splut; these words don't describe anything, let alone give a meaningful comment from myself, Justin Evans, the illustrator. Oh well. I would like to thank no one for this opportunity to do these illustrations for this compilation of beauty and love in word form.

I hope you enjoy the following drawings. Hey, at least now you can't flip through this book in 3 seconds and whine about how it didn't have any pictures. Thank you.

Sympaticos:

Sympaticos (Sympathy)
Luminos (Enlightenment)
Veritos (Truth)

Today:

A Night of Prokofiev
The Anatomy of Sunshine
Waiting
The First Rose
Dublin Nights

New Perspectives:

The Forgotten Tomorrow
My **Minotaur**
The Seasons
Leyenda del Sol

The Verm Chronicles:

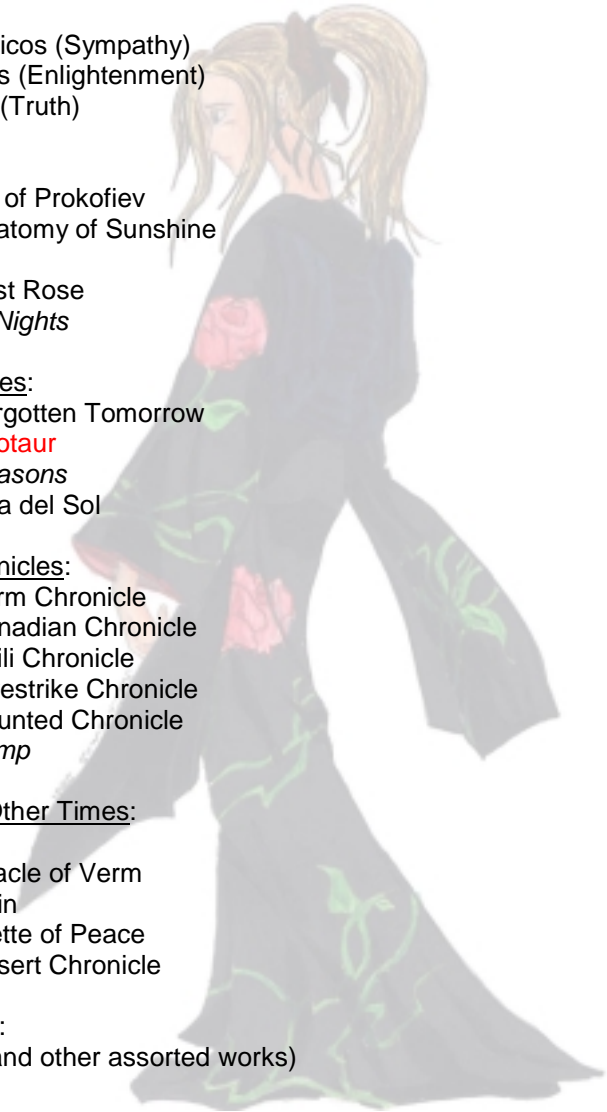
The Verm Chronicle
The Canadian Chronicle
The Chili Chronicle
The Awestrike Chronicle
The Haunted Chronicle
The Lamp

Other Places, Other Times:

In War
The Oracle of Verm
The Rain
A Vignette of Peace
The Desert Chronicle

Lost and Found:

Quell (and other assorted works)



Sympaticos



Sympaticos

After Peter had left his office from the night shift with coat and book in hand, he scooted quietly down the polished halls. Although it was already dark outside, inside the lights gleamed wickedly against the waxed green and gray tiles. Then, with little fanfare, the lights dimmed in the hall, leaving only a few lights that no longer gleamed wickedly but rather left soft footprints on the floor. Peter slowly shuffled away from the dying wing, and had almost left when a flickering light from one of the rooms caught his attention. He stopped in quiet admiration for this dragon in the night, lonely flames licking the waxed floors. Knocking softly, he entered the mouth.

Inside Peter saw that the room was one of the smaller ones in the wing. Its lone occupant was a girl of twenty something who lay

in her bed. The TV was the source of the flickering lights, but the volume had been muted in accordance to the noise policies. The bed was raised a little, and the girl was lying back on several pillows staring at the TV. The girl hadn't heard Peter's entrance, and remained in a trance. Peter cleared his throat. The girl looked up with a moment of disbelief caught in her eyes, little bits of fire frozen in her eyes for that moment.

"Oh, right, sorry. It must be late. I lost track of time."

The girl fumbled for the remote control, and managed to turn it off. There was a numbing moment of silence as the TV faded and left only the dim street lights from the window. Finally, the girl broke the silence.

"Are you a doctor? You're not dressed like one."

"Well, I guess I'm a doctor. I'm just getting off my shift. Yours was the only room with light still in it."

"Yeah. I didn't know there was a lights-out policy too."

"There isn't," Peter laughed.

"Oh," the girl replied in sad silence.

"Sorry," Peter said awkwardly.

"What kind of doctor are you?"

"Oh, um well I'm a psychiatrist. I'm a counselor here."

"A counselor, huh? How come I never see you around here?"

"Oh I don't know. I usually stay in my office. I don't usually do room to room."

"I see. I just got transferred from Morton."

"Oh ok. Uh, what- why, uh-"

"They don't have very good long-term care centers there. You guys have a very good center."

"Right, yeah. So, what were you watching?"

"Oh, the news. I don't get out much," she said with a smile.

Peter smiled back weakly. Time wove more silence, until once again the girl interrupted.

"You must have a very hard job."

"Me?"

"Yeah. Hopeless even."

"Hopeless? I never thought of it that way. When I began med-school I thought I'd become a surgeon. But I freaked out at the thought of losing someone at the table."

"So you took a job where you never win?"

"It's different," he replied. "I-"

She waited.

"Never mind, it's hard to explain."

"Try me," she said, eyes burning again. Peter was caught off guard, and stumbled for words.

"Well, I, I think it's just a matter of people."

"People?"

"Well, ok, let me put it this way. If you are a surgeon, you deal with basically a machine, the body. You try to fix it when it breaks. Just that easy. People like me just try to fix something that will never be fixed."

"Ok," she said back, "but it sounds like the mechanics get it easy."

"Oh, well, maybe. But they either win or lose. There's no middle ground to progress in. I have time- time and space. I've only done this for two years. There's no clock beating down my back."

"Are you sure?" she said, lying back in bed totally. She brushed back her hair and let the silence settle in. Peter's eyes had now adjusted to the dark room, and he saw that the room was filled with roaring flowers which were wilting in the bare light of night. A few stuffed animals filled the spare tables.

"It's a slow clock then," he said.

"See. Everyone has that clock. Just, a few of us can't rewind ours anymore."

"What makes you think they need to be rewound? Most people don't take time to think about that kind of stuff, not at your age-"

Peter stopped himself, cringing.

"Its ok. It happens."

"Not to me," Peter replied. "I'm sorry. I'm just tired."

"Happens to the best of us."

"Usually I try to be very careful. Usually I don't say dumb things like that."

"Usually you don't meet smartasses like me," she laughed.

"So, Doctor—Ignatius?"

"How'd you know my name—"

"Not the brightest bulb in the box huh."

"Wha—"

She pointed at his hospital badge.

"Oh," he said, "right. You're the smartass, I'm the dumbass."

"So, you never explained how your job isn't hopeless."

"Hope is relative."

"You are terrible at this game, you know?" she said, laughing.

"Ok. Hope is like, uh, taste."

"Taste," she said blandly.

"Yes. Everyone has different tastes, and hope depends from person to person. You can have hope to live and survive, or you can have hope to fulfill something before you fade away."

"That's cruel," she whispered.

"Yes, but that's the only way I can go to work every day. Otherwise I couldn't do it."

"Have you even seen that first kind of hope?"

"Oh, yes. But sometimes there is no hope, and you have to mold one dream into another."

"Hope to do something useful before you knock off? That's a crappy dream."

"Sometimes its all people have. Even the kids, they know when one hope won't work. All I do is guide them and help them find something. Not necessarily 'doing something useful before you knock off.' But something."

"I think you should have become a surgeon." The silence settled in again. The orange glow from the outside lights reminded Peter of orange butterflies settling down all over the room, fluttering and melting into the bedside, the table, the flowers, the teddy bear, her face. Peter felt like he was trapped inside a picture.

"It is getting late. You should sleep."

Peter stared. The girl laughed. Without a word he began moving towards the door.

"Hey, Doc, your coat."

Peter turned and reached for the coat which he had left on her bedside. As she handed it to him, his book fell out onto her lap.

"What's this?"

"Oh nothing, a little journal thing I keep."

"There are different handwritings in it."

Peter sighed and scratched his hair.

"Yeah, every patient I visit gets to make his or her own page. You want to have a page?"

"No, I'm not your patient. And there's only two blank ones left. It'd be a waste."

"Don't be so sure. I had one kid just doodle on his page. Keep it for now, and think it over. If you want to use a page, go ahead. I'll come back for it."

She girl carefully fingered the book; the soft red cover felt smooth in the dimming lights. Peter returned to the doorway.

"I never got your name," he said.

"Claire."

Peter blinked once, and then stepped back out into the hallway.

The next morning, Peter dozed through several breaks in the morning, waiting impatiently for an appointment. There were only three, and they were all non-urgent and frustratingly banal. Finally lunchtime came and he wolfed down his food, then set off to find Claire's room again. He wandered down the same wing he had been in the night before, glancing at patient records until he found her room. He knocked on her door, and a muffled reply answered "come in."

Claire looked up, halfway through a glass of water. She bubbled, and Peter couldn't help but laugh. She put down the glass of water.

"You're not in it."

"Hmmm?"

"You haven't made an entry."

"I don't recall being my own patient," he said.

He came and sat down at her side, and watched as she slowly flipped through the book, past the entries. Most of the pages were poems, stark black in thin writing leaving an ocean of white on the pages. Some of the pages were completely filled with letters to diaries, journals, and all sorts of people. Other pages were brilliantly filled with colors; one page was a miniature dry brush painting. Still others were decorated with crayon and marker, the work of young children showing drawings of all sorts of things.

"Its remarkable."

"I remember that," Peter said, pointing at one of the hundreds of pages that flew by. It was a starkly real picture, drawn in colored pencil. The drawing was nothing more than the hallway outside like it was during the night, echoing floors of green and gray.

"The girl who drew that never remembered entering the room, so she had never seen the hallway. When she got better, she sat in the hallway and drew it."

"Why?" Claire asked.

"I don't know. Maybe she liked the way it looked."

There was a long pause, and Claire sipped her water.

"Are you on your lunch break?"

"Yes," he replied. "If anyone needs me they page me or call my cell phone. Today's a slow day."

"I talked to my doctor. You know what she said? She said that all counselors do room to room, at least for a while."

"Yeah, I never said that I never did room to room. I stopped."

"Why?"

"Its not a good story."

"Try me."

"I'll tell you later. Are you going to add an entry or not?"

"I'll do it later."

Peter's pager beeped, and, with a glance at Claire, he got up.

"I'll tell you when there's an entry."

Claire watched Peter go, and flipped back to the picture of the hallway, imagining him walking down the waxed floors.

Peter walked quickly to the intensive care, bursting through the double steel doors and into the lobby, his white coat sweeping behind him. There, Doctor Spirago gave him a look, and with her eyes motioned him over. She was standing over a family, which was barely sitting on the edge of their chairs, eyes flitting frantically.

"And this is Doctor Ignatius. He's a counselor here, and if you need anything he can help you."

Doctor Spirago began going down the hall. The mother, father, and sister immediately got up and followed. Peter brushed past the family and looked at Doctor Spirago.

"Massive hemorrhaging. Can't stop it," she said.

Peter slowed down to face the family.

"You can call me Peter. Is there anything you need?"

"A priest," the father said.

"Ok we can call a priest, but in the ti--"

"Dammit, call a priest. Call one now."

Peter looked at the father's restless eyes and headed towards a phone. The family swept into a room. Peter made the call and turned into that room. Inside he found the family grouped around a young man. Another doctor was speaking.

"-stop it. The only thing we can do is give him some general anesthetic and make it as comfortable as--"

The family was weeping over the man. The father looked back up at Peter.

"Where's the priest? There needs to be a priest here." Peter looked around restlessly. He heard the patient breathing, but barely. Peter froze uncomfortably, finding himself again in the middle of a picture he could not change. He struggled against himself, but his puppet arms would not respond. He felt himself wanting to leave the room. A wave of fever welled up in him, and he felt his lunch stirring. He took a deep breath, but the nausea would not subside. *Where was the priest?* He looked up again, and the entire family simultaneously looked at him. He forced cold and rigidity into himself and looked away. The priest arrived.

Doctor Spirago stepped out, and Peter followed, wiping sweat off his brow. She handed him the patient file.

"Chavez. Car accident."

Peter nodded, barely.
"Sorry about this one."

He nodded again.

"You ok? You look pale," she said.

"Just a little stuffy in there. Better now."

He nodded.

Doctor Spirago looked at him one more time before turning and walking quickly back down the hallway. The door to the room clicked shut behind him, and he stood alone in the hallway. The only thing he heard from behind the door was the mother crying and the deep, solemn voice of Father McCully.

He sat on a nearby chair and waited for the family to emerge. The door clicked open and Father McCully appeared.

"Peter. How are you?"

"Alright, I suppose."

Father McCully smiled and patted his shoulder.

"This one was pretty rough."

"Yeah," Peter replied.

"Father?"

"Yes?"

"How can you bear it?"

He thought for so long that Peter began to think he didn't understand. But finally he looked back.

"I can't. But then again, no one can."

Peter stared.

"Have faith, my son. And take it easy, you look thin. Eat some more."

McCully disappeared around a corner.

The family emerged, drying tears. The doctor followed and closed the door behind him. Peter walked with the family.

"If you want to stay here, I can arrange for room."

"Could you?" the mother asked.

"Yes, it-wouldn't be a problem. I know that you may not want to talk to anyone right now, and that's ok. You don't have to say anything right now. I'll find you a room. When, and if you want someone to talk to, I will be more than happy to listen. Just ask a nurse to page Doctor Ignatius. Let's find you a room."

Peter found them a guest room, and gave them directions to the store downstairs which could provide them with anything they needed for the night. He then stayed and talked with them for a long while, hearing about the young man who had just died. Who he was, what he did. And like always, he didn't deserve his fate. Then the family was quiet, and Peter quietly slipped away.

Peter glanced at his watch. It was already nine o'clock. He slipped back to his office, took off his white coat and grabbed his other coat. He set down his newest patient file on his desk, turned off the lights, locked the door, and left. He shuffled down the green and gray halls, lights gleaming wickedly. At Claire's room, he knocked softly. There was no response. He opened the room.

Inside, Claire was slumped over the book, snoring softly. By her side was a box of colored pencils, and on the table by her bed was one of the vases. In it was one rose, which had obviously begun wilting. The book was open, and a sketch had begun to take form. He crept closer and saw that her drawing of the rose was still lively. Peter took the book out of her hands and set it down on the table. He stood up and paused, then stooped over and adjusted her blanket. Then, without a word, he left her room. Outside, the hallway lights were dim. There was no sound.

"I began making an entry."

"Oh really? Let's see."

Claire showed him the unfinished sketch.

"The only problem," she continued, "is that the rose is wilting. But I think I can make a cool picture of the rose if I draw each portion from a different day."

"That's interesting."

"And now, your story," Claire said.

"I'd really pref-"

"We had a deal doc, tell it."

He paused.

Peter reached for the book, and Claire handed it to him. He flipped through until he came to a nearly empty page. In the middle of the page was a rust-colored smear the size and length of a pinky.

Inside, words were scrawled. Peter sighed and whispered them: "I see red."

"I once did room to room visits of trauma victims and long term care patients. I still do now, but only for emergencies and things like that. I mainly do family counseling and things like that. But once, once, a long time ago in my mind, I did.

"There once was a boy. From the burn unit. He had been getting better, and they had taken him off the heavy general anesthesia. He had burns on sixty percent of his body. Pretty bad, especially since he was younger than you are. But he had healed well, with the help of skin grafts.

"Once he was able to speak, I talked to him daily. And he seemed alright. His house had caught on fire; someone had set the space heater too close to the drapes or something like that. He had been sleeping, and the rest of his family had been so busy getting out that they had forgotten him. He made it out, but not without getting burned.

"He had taken it pretty well. Bandages covered some of his face, his arms, and his legs. As the skin began to heal, it began to itch, especially where he had needed the skin grafts. So the doctors treated it with some calamine and left it be. But he couldn't stand it. Mainly, I tried to keep him busy: talking, reading, anything to keep his mind off the itching.

"So one day I gave him this book, and gave him the usual one page. I didn't expect him to take it that seriously. He sat all day and night thinking about something to put. He'd say that he only had room for one great statement about existence. He was joking, of course, and he told me one day that he was going to fill the page with dirty jokes.

Peter paused to catch his breath. He looked into Claire's eyes.

"One morning, I came into his room for our daily session, and found the book on the floor, open to that page. In it was a smear, which, at the time, was the color of blood. In it he had scrawled just that, 'I see red.'

"I looked at him, and he was bleeding from all over. He had ripped the bandages off his face and his arms, and had scratched

them deep with fingernails that hadn't been trimmed in a while. He had ripped off entire chunks of flesh, which were lying in his lap. In other places he had simply peeled off the very top layer of flesh, leaving wet, bloody strips across his arms and cheeks.

"He stared at me with blood running down his neck into his shirt. All he said was 'I couldn't find any colored pencils. Ha!'

"I looked for his call button but he had ripped the cord out. I stepped out into the hall and called for a doctor, and began wrapping him up. But he kept scratching all over. He couldn't stop, it was so bad. By now he was laughing and crying at the same time, until he was sobbing between bursts of laughter. I tried to tie his hands down, but there was nothing to tie him with and by now my hands were slippery.

"Finally, I think the blood loss was starting to get to him, and he began to lose that giddy feeling, and the sobs became more frequent, and the laughing became less frequent. Doctors arrived, but couldn't give him anesthetics. They wheeled him out to get his bandages back on, and to stop the bleeding. One of the nurses stared at me, asking, 'What happened?' but what was I supposed to tell her? I just shook my head at her. I washed up and got the book, and the blood had dried by then and looked just like that. But I don't go room to room anymore."

Claire was staring at the book in his hands, and she could see the slow stroke of the boy's finger, paintbrush.

"That wasn't your fault," she said sympathetically.

"It was though. I went through all those years of school and residency to learn. To learn to see people, and see the signs of things like that. But I missed this boy completely. He was too easy to diagnose and put away and dismiss. He had recovered too well. I don't know, I just missed him completely."

Peter stopped, and Claire closed her eyes and put her hand on his. He looked down at her hand, drew his away, then without another word got up and walked away.

"You should stop blaming yourself," Claire said.

"I can't. It's just human guilt. There's nothing you or anybody else can do," he said, not looking back.

"Oh really? Try me."

He paused, turned around, and slowly sat back down by her side.

"I don't get nightmares," he said.

"You probably don't dream well either."

"I don't dream at all."

"Close your eyes," she said.

Looking at her oddly, he did so.

"Just relax," she said.

Claire took her first two fingers and placed them on his forehead. Peter saw the emptiness of the blackness before his eyes. When so much time had passed that he wondered whether he was asleep or not, he listened to her suddenly sigh, and then it was the most musical and beautiful thing in the world. Like a wind sweeping through a valley, the breath billowed buoyantly like the fluffiest cloud down a cool misty landscape. Somehow that first sigh echoed on forever in his mind, ravenously filling the emptiness of black. Painting on echoes, the sigh consumed canvas faster than he could remember the landscapes, mountains, deserts, and oceans passing before his eyes. The vast projection kept going, the last original echoes of her sigh created new sounds and winds which slowly grew into brilliant pictures around him.

Peter himself sighed at the feeling, and before he knew it he looked down at one of the rivers, and saw himself standing on a tiny island in the flow. He paused and listened for Claire's sigh, but he became distracted by the giddy flow of the river. As he stared, the water before him swept red and swept out, and the river turned as blood and all around him the blackness swept in, the clouds darkened, and that wonderful sigh suddenly screamed in his mind.

"Peter!"

He paused, opening his eyes and stealing away from the madness. Claire was holding his hand again.

"It's ok. You just lost control for a moment."

Peter stood up, wrenching his hand away.

"What the hell was that?"

"Nothing but your own emotions," she said.

"My own emotions? That was a dream and a nightmare all in one."

"You lost control. It was momentary."

"What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything! I just helped open yourself up. Isn't that what you're supposed to do? Open people up to let them heal? Physician, heal thyself, remember? Don't be a jackass about it."

"You're right, it was momentary."

Peter got up to leave, feeling her eyes behind him. As the door clicked shut, Peter stood by the door and listened. After a long moment of silence, all he heard was the soft scratching of pencil on paper.

The next morning when he came by Claire's room, Peter found it neat and cleaned, and in place of Claire, a nurse was standing over her bed, pondering over the rose.

"Where's Claire?" Peter asked.

The nurse glanced up and gave him a confused look.

"She went to get her daily treatment."

The nurse stared at the vase.

"This rose is already dead. I better throw it out."

"No, no," Peter told the surprised nurse. "She's sketching it, I think."

"Oh, alright doctor."

After the nurse left, Peter went to the bedside, and saw that the rose was nearly done and almost completely colored in. He looked past the rose to the final page. He unclipped his pen from his coat, and in small, easy handwriting, he wrote "The First Rose" on the top of the last page. He sat staring at those words for a while until his beeper went off. Clipping his pen back on, he got up and walked as fast as he could to ER.

Inside, he witnessed the hustle and bustle of a patient arriving. A teenage boy was being wheeled in, bandages impatiently wrapped around his head and other parts of him. He was not awake.

Doctor Gayle Adams stopped pushing the boy and let two assistants push him in. She stood an island in the storm as another couple came rushing in. They were about the same age as the first

boy, and one was bruised and bleeding. The boy was helping the girl, who was nursing her arm and looking around frightened.

"Car accident. We've got one guy who'll need a neurosurgeon if he wants to live through the night. One girl, broken arm. And one boy, the driver, cuts and bruises. But he's hurting in other places, I'll tell you. The girl and the driver are girlfriend and boyfriend. I have all my people on the first one. If you could take those two, get them cleaned up, and as soon as I can I'll send someone."

"No problem Gayle."

"Thanks Peter, you're a life saver."

Peter walked after the boy and the girl, catching up to them before they reached the doors leading to surgery.

"I'm sorry, you can't go in there," he said as they whirled to face him.

"But-" the boy started

"There's nothing better you can do right now than let our doctors take care of him. What's your name?"

"Aaron. And this is Alexi."

The girl nodded timidly.

"I'm Doctor Ignatius. You were in a car accident?"

Peter slowly began guiding them to a back room. They nodded.

"Is your arm alright?"

"I think it's broken," she replied.

"Ok," Peter said, examining the arm. "Well, we'll get it wrapped up until someone can come take a better look at it. You're both in high school?"

"Yes," the girl said quietly.

Inside the room, Peter looked at the arm. The fracture seemed very clean; no pieces of bone were displaced or rupturing the skin. He took out some bandages and disinfectant.

"Ok, I'm just going to clean these scrapes. This will burn."

She flinched as he cleaned the arm and a minor cut on her forehead. He moved on to wipe the cuts on the boy. As he took out some bandages to secure her arm, he began talking to them, asking what grade they were in, outside hobbies, and generally things to

take their minds off the accident. Peter tried not to mention the other boy who was in surgery. However, Aaron remained silent and nervous, and Alexi was on the verge of tears.

"Alright, you are all cleaned up."

"What about Eliot?"

"As soon as a nurse comes to help you with your arm, I'll go check on your friend, alright?"

"It was my fault, I wasn't paying attention" Aaron muttered. The girl choked back a sob.

"Close your eyes," Peter said suddenly. Alexi looked at him with blurry eyes. Aaron eyed the doctor with suspicion.

"Don't worry, it's just a relaxation technique. It'll take your thoughts off the pain."

As she closed her eyes and breathed softly, Peter reached with his first two fingers and gently touched her forehead. Deep inside, he tried to recreate the moment Claire had given him, that artistic voice that painted over the bleakness, and with a sigh, he let that voice into the girl with the broken arm. She gasped ever so slightly and then relaxed and sat back in her chair. Peter moved away, and let her sit in peace. He turned to Aaron.

"I know this will be tough for you to think about, but this was not your fault. I've seen many terrible things come through, and I've come to know about things like this. And it's not your fault.

"I once had a patient. A boy. He was in a terrible accident, and he had many burns. As they healed, they itched, but that could be treated. I talked to him. That's what I do, I'm a psychiatrist, I talk to people. And for the longest time, I could find nothing wrong with him. He had dealt with the accident very well."

"But," Aaron said, interrupting.

"But, one day he became very ill, and very scared, and he hurt himself very badly. For a long time, I blamed myself; after all, I was supposed to find out if anything was troubling him, and I failed. I thought that if a better doctor had been seeing him, it never would have happened.

"But recently, very recently, I've been talking to a few people, and I've come to the realization that there was nothing I could do. I learned that by letting that one moment hold me down, I was failing

at helping other people. I kept blaming myself and ignoring the people I should have helped.

"Don't blame yourself, because it wasn't your fault. By thinking about it, you've become-, well, bogged down by it. Your friends will need your support, and trust me they won't blame you for it. So neither should you. Other people need your help."

Aaron began saying something, but was interrupted by a doctor arriving. He introduced himself and took a look at Alexi, who was nearly asleep. Aaron, looked down and thought to himself. Peter left quietly and found Gayle Adams outside.

"How are they?" she asked.

"They're not doing so bad. How's the other kid?"

"Not good. We got him stabilized, but Doctor Sumter thinks there may be brain damage of some sort. We just don't know yet."

Peter sighed and checked his watch. It was almost noon already.

"Look, Peter, I'm sorry about pulling you away like that. I just thought that the other two would really need someone to talk to."

"It's okay. Just-"

He checked his watch again.

"Just make sure you schedule them some follow-ups with me."

Doctor Adams nodded and left.

Claire was still not in her room when Peter came again. However, she had finished her rose picture and had signed it. The book was lying open on her desk. On it was a pencil and a pen, and in very light pencil Claire had written "Insert brilliant work here" in the blank space below what Peter had written. Peter picked up the pen and smiled.

*There is always a first rose. One that blooms before the rest.
One that is able to wake before all the others. The first rose
Will open its petals to the dawn before any others have even stirred.
That first rose will always be the first to hear families awake
In their homes. It will smell the fresh breath of morning's cool.*

*Maybe, though, that first rose may also suffer its fate first.
It will die while the other roses are still vibrant. With any luck,
though, it will last to see the sun it awoke too fall down into the sky.
Though that first rose may pass before any other, no one would ever
say that it was any less beautiful.*

*When the intrepid sleeper looks out in the dim hours before dawn,
His eyes may stumble across the first rose.
He may try to bring it home, carefully clasping soft petals
Of a silk finer than water. The thorns, though, are still sharp,
And below each leaf of the first rose, the growl of youth
Stirs and shivers ever so slightly.
So if you awake to find the first rose of the day,
Think not of tearing it loose. Watch it explode into the dew.
Watch bees dance and buzz about all day.
Step out and smell its fragrance, and, if you dare, touch it gently,
Just enough so its blushed silk trembles in your hand.
And when night falls, watch the first rose slip into its weepy slumber.
Mourn its faded glory and cry for its worn and wilted body.
But do not feel sorry for it; though it is gone, its sweet breath still
lingers in the air. Its blush still burns in your mind,
And you will remember that the first rose lived and was not
Forgotten*

Peter put down the pen.

For a week, every time he looked, Claire was not there. She had been in the room, or someone else had read the book recently. Every time, though, there was only an empty room or a nurse with news that Claire was somewhere else. Peter kept himself busy, seeing other patients. He resumed room to room duty, becoming part of the entourage of mental health doctors paraded past patients who were flagged for help.

Occasionally, he saw the couple visiting their friend, who was still bedridden. However, they did not seek further sessions with any psychiatrists, including Peter. The two looked better, though.

After a week had passed, Peter only checked once a day. And then every other day. Finally, one night, Peter decided to check for the last time as he was leaving his office. He picked up his coat and headed out, his shoes tapping quietly on the wickedly gleaming green and gray tiles. The lights in the hallway were already dimmed, and Claire's room was dark. Opening the door, he entered. Claire was rolled over with her face away from him.

The door creaked as he turned to leave. Ever so softly, he heard Claire.

"Tell me doc, is it bad?"

He walked towards her in the dark, the only light illuminating her face was the pale orange glow from the street lights. She was pale and thin, and looked worn. She coughed once into her hand, and held it out. In it was a piece of leftover green Jello from lunch.

Claire laughed.

"Well, lets see. Coughing up desert? My diagnosis: too many sweets."

"Your diagnosis sucks doc."

Claire laughed again.

"I saw your entry into your own book. I think it goes nicely with my drawing."

"Yeah," he replied.

"You can have the book back now."

"Actually," Peter began, "you can keep it. I don't need it anymore. I feel better now."

"I'm glad you feel better."

He touched her forehead with two fingers and felt waves of weariness.

"Honestly, doc, I don't feel too well."

"Keep the book. Or give it away."

"I read my brother your entry. He liked it, I think. Maybe he could have it."

"Yeah. Yeah."

Claire sighed.

"Claire, you've-, well, you've changed me. I'm a better doctor, a better person. How can I thank you?"

"There is a noise policy. You shouldn't ramble so much at this late an hour."

There was a long pause as Peter studied her face as she stared outside the window.

"I'm really tired," she said.

"I think I'll start a new book," he said.

"Better be dedicated to me," she replied.

"That's presumptuous of you."

"I'm a rude person, remember?"

She smiled very weakly, and in the silence and dim light there was a long pause. Then, with one arm, she took hold of his arm and with the other his neck, and with great effort pulled herself into a sitting position. She leaned on him heavily, and he wrapped his arm around her thinning waist and held her up. They stared outside at the night sky, where only two or three stars could be seen twinkling in the light polluted sky. The warm glow of the outside world washed around them and clung to their clothing.

Claire turned to him, leaning inward gently, and slowly kissed him. He kissed back, and the kiss felt like a sigh, and the sigh felt like a dying breath. She pulled back slowly, opened her eyes, and stared at him. She then leaned against him again and kissed him slowly and softly again, exhaling quietly into him with all her energy, a long dear goodbye. She pulled back again with her eyes still closed, and breathed heavily in the cold silence.

"Please don't see me again."

Peter blinked and tried to say something, but stopped. He only touched her hand one last time, feeling the smooth skin and the thin fingers. He got up slowly, looking at Claire, her eyes still closed. When he reached the doorway, she lay back down, facing away from him. He opened the door and stood in the doorway and listened to her soft breaths.

"There's a new lights-out policy," he began. But his next thought stalled, and the air in him gave out. He turned out into the hallway. Claire heard it, and smiled, but he was already gone.

When he got home, Peter took out a journal book. It was similar to the first one, except the binding was of a lighter color. He opened it up to the first page and picked up his pen. Thinking to himself, he put down the pen and began rummaging in his garage. His neighbors, had they been awake, would have wondered what had gotten into the good doctor, who was making a lot of noise in his garage at very early in the morning. They would have been even more shocked when a resounding “yes!” was heard through the crashing of boxes.

Peter took out the old painting kit and looked through the colors, finally settling on sky blue. He squeezed out the paint, which was amazingly still good. Setting aside the old, cracked paintbrush, he mixed the paint with some water and dipped his finger in it. After studying the sky blue for a while, he went to the journal book, and on the first page made a smear the size of his finger, about the size of his pinky. Then, without hesitation, he picked up his pen and wrote in the middle of the sky-

for claire

Satisfied, he washed his hands and went to bed.

Luminos

For some reason, the floors looked really familiar. They were waxed and shiny. They were distracting to the listener, and the storyteller stopped.

“Hey! Hey are you listening?”

A voice from outside the room yelled.

“Pipe down in there!”

The listener looked back up at the storyteller, a middle aged man.

“Yes, yes I’m listening.”

“Then tell me what I just said.”

“You skidded off the road.”

“Right. We skidded off the road, because I had to swerve to avoid it.”

“It?” the listener asked impatiently.

“A Yeti.”

“A Yeti?”

"A Yeti."

There was silence in the room. Empty shelves and bright lights reminded everyone of something else. For the listener, the bright lights were a headache. They, along with the storyteller, were distracting his escape plans.

"Remind me never to go anywhere with him," a young man said. "He's terrible luck."

"It was your idea," the storyteller said back.

"What is a Yeti anyway?" the listener asked.

"Mm, ever hear of bigfoot?"

"Yeah."

"Like that. Except white, like camouflaged for snow."

"I see. So what happened next?"

"Well, it was knocked out, and it wasn't breathing. So I gave it CPR and—"

"Whoa, whoa whoa. You gave a Yeti CPR."

"Sure. Same old, same old. But then it woke up, and we ran back to the truck. Suddenly though the truck fell through!"

"Fell through?"

"Oh, we had skidded it onto ice."

"You had skidded onto ice," said the young man sitting next to the storyteller.

"Yeah. Sleepy here was out cold."

"Ok," the listener said impatiently, "then what?"

"Then we fell through the ice, and traveled back in time."

"Back in time."

"Back in time," the storyteller repeated.

There was another moment of silence. The listener wondered what was going on outside, but the metal doors were too thick. He stood up to stretch, and then sat back down. A couple people shifted uncomfortably. Finally, someone said it.

"I have to pee."

A collective sigh went out across the room.

"Hold it," one of the men said.

"So you traveled how far back?" the listener continued.

"Not too far," the storyteller said. "We went right back to that morning before we crashed. So, being stupid, we set out again, and crashed again. This time though—"

"I have to pee!" the man said, pounding on the door.

"Go pee on yourself," the muffled voice replied.

"Well that was rude," the storyteller said.

"This time—" the listener continued.

"This time, there was a hideous lake monster. It was, um, in the lake. And it was, well— it was the Loch Ness monster."

"In Michigan."

"I never said this was in Michigan," the storyteller said with a confused look.

"Never mind, just keep going."

"So anyway, I defeated the monster, but we were kidnapped by the Yeti, or so we thought. But then we passed out and we were home again."

"Back in time?"

"Here's the thing. The second time we ended up in Thanksgiving. This time, we—"

"Oh God I can't hold it any longer!" the man shouted. Then, in a moment of inspiration, he found one of the large plastic garbage bags in the corner, and unceremoniously peed into it. The room was silent except for the sound of—

"This time—" the listener said loudly.

"Right. This time we were captured by a UFO, which of course contained future duplicates of us that wanted to give us advance knowledge. But we killed them with the help of the Yeti, and escaped back home."

"We? What's this we crap?" the young man next to him said. The storyteller ignored him.

"That's it?" the listener asked.

"Well, yeah. What were you looking for?"

"Got any other stories," the listener asked.

"Actually—" the young man began. He was cut off by two loud bangs from outside, muffled by the doors. Then a series of screams, a few muffled thumps, and silence. The people in the room waited.

"You were saying," the listener said.

"Right," the young man continued. "Well we were headed to Texas once—"

Officer Wilder wiped off trickles of sweat from his forehead. He hated being outside, especially in winter, especially on days like this. He shouldn't be warm, he reasoned. *It's frickin' cold out he'e and I'm sweatin' like a pig.*

Wilder wasn't that much like a pig. He was a little "overweight," as he would say, but he was no pig. Leaning against his police car, he thought of pulling some John Wayne stunt, but the thought of having to walk to across the street was, well, unappealing. *Let the SWAT team run. That's what they get the big bucks fo'.*

Indeed, the SWAT team was already here. They already had snipers on the nearby rooftops, and a team ready for insertion through the side door. The SWAT captain approached Wilder.

"What do you think Wilder?"

What the rotund officer lacked in endurance he made up for in brute strength and cunning mind. Wilder fingered his gun anxiously, the key ring clicking quietly on the handle.

"Oh, idunno Will, side inse'tion, two sqwads? These guys ain't no pros. Coupla flashbangs should knock'mup pretty good. Afta' that hit em wit da bean bags, and then, and then, well, and then I say you buy me cwoffee down at Patta'son's."

The SWAT captain scratched his helmet thoughtfully.

"Two squads?"

"Yeah, yeah. Hell they better do something."

Wilder pointed at the squad, which had just finished using its tactical ops skills to overcome a hotdog stand.

"Huh. Yeah. Alpha, Bravo, on me!"

Alpha stuffed his mouth full of hotdogs and ran to positions. Bravo got up, and Wilder sighed. He wanted to go home. His house had a heater. *Damn it's cold.*

"Ok, Alpha, set up on side door. Bravo, as soon as you hear Alpha's kickdown throw in one diversionary, same to you Alpha. Then full in, stun and take alive."

"Mmmmmffff," Alpha leader replied.

Wilder sighed again. *These two assholes dragged me outta my comfy desk fo' this?* The two men inside were still holding onto their pistols and nervously looking around. The one near the lobby doorway was nervously watching as the SWAT teams got into position. The one near the vault was eyeballing his plastic bags full of cash. *At least they got into the vault. That's not too shabby.*

He leaned against his door and aimed casually at the man in the lobby. The radio clicked, and the SWAT captain's voice came on.

"Alpha and Bravo will insert in 30 seconds. All other teams hold positions, hold fire."

Wilder yawned, and exhaled slowly, watching his breath lace in the cold air. *The hotdog guy!*

"Hey! You! Hotdog guy! C'mere!"

The hotdog guy pointed to himself with his eyes bulging. Wilder wondered whether the SWAT team assault on his hotdog stand had made the guy pee his pants.

"Yeah, you. Get ov'a' here!"

The guy slowly wheeled his cart over as Wilder motioned with the hand not on the gun. Inside the building, Alpha leader eyed the door.

"Yeah, how much a'e dem, uh, chili dogs. The one with all the goods on em. Yeah, that one."

Bravo leader stared at his second in command.

"Uh, which one's smoke and which one's flashbang."

Alpha smashed the door.

"Dammit you idiot just throw something in there."

Bravo threw both in. There were two large bangs as first Alpha's, then Bravo's, went off. The smoke went off too, and both teams charged in screaming "get down, get down!"

Suddenly, there was a white blur. The first man in the lobby went down screaming. Both teams looked around, confused in the smoke, and took up positions.

Wilder looked up from the hotdog stand and looked into the building. A smoke alarm went off, and he thought he heard screaming. Something big and white moved towards the vault.

The first man fell with a thump.

"All teams, hold positions!" Wilder heard on his radio.

"I surrender! Oh Jesus I surrender!" the man near the vault cried. Then suddenly he was upside down and screaming, being shaken wildly and whirled about. He, too, fell with a thump.

"Dammit Bravo I said hold fire."

"No one fired Cap't."

The screaming subsided, and the smoke began clearing through the open doors.

Outside, Wilder munched quietly on his chili dog. *Damn this is one good hotdog. Lotsa onions— man! I should have this guy outside the precinct. Wonda' who makes this kinda chili in town. This isn't none of that canned crap, that's fo' ce'uhta'n. I really should talk to the hotdog guy about hanging around outside the precinct. It'd be good business.* Wilder chuckled to himself.

Alpha and Bravo teams were each dragging out the unconscious bank robbers, who were both fairly bloodied and beaten. The SWAT captain looked at them.

"I thought I said to hold fire."

"Check our cartridges," Alpha leader said, "we did."

The SWAT captain suddenly smiled.

"Read the headlines now! SWAT team takes down bank robbers without a single shot fired!"

"Sure, sure," Alpha leader said.

He unceremoniously dumped the unconscious robber by the SWAT van.

"Hey, the hotdog guy!" Alpha leader suddenly exclaimed.

Alpha leader ran towards Wilder's car. Placing his gun and spare flashbang on the counter of the hotdog stand, he eyed one of the rotating hotdogs.

"Hey, Wilder, aren't these good?"

"Shu'h a'h"

The hotdog man peed his pants.

"Is this really necessary?" Ed asked.

"Yes, yes it is," Pat replied.

The air outside was freezing cold, and Ed saw his own breath billow out in quickly disappearing clouds. The bank was almost empty.

"See, it's empty. It's perfect."

Ed rolled his eyes at his Uncle, who like usual, had lost his mind. Last time it had been a large parcel of land in Texas. This time, outer space.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," he sighed.

"I know! Can you believe it!" Pat said.

"I just said, no, I can't."

"Well believe it, because here we are."

"You see," Pat began, "our mistake has been trying to get rich on earth. But people own the earth. But not the moon! People have thought about this, of course, but they either don't have the technical knowhow, or the business savvy to accomplish this."

Ed stared at his Uncle.

"Yet you have neither."

"Aha! But, you see, that's ok. That's why we are going to found in international company that gets the people who have the knowledge together with the people who have the business skills. Moonco!"

"You're drunk."

"No, no no! Think about it. By consolidating today's leading moon mining experts and space entrepreneurs, we won't need any knowledge or business savvy. Our only importance is the bringing together of the two sides."

"I was wrong. You're not drunk. You're high."

"It's a flawless business my young friend. We just need some 'venture capital'"

"Your methods are a little less than perfect," Ed replied.

"This'll work. Just follow my lead, and everything will go according to plan."

Security was not there that day, and the bank only had, at most, five or six people, two people working the registers, one manager, and one other bank official.

"Piece of cake," Pat said, smiling, patting his pocket.

They walked into the bank, through the doors, and took a look around. A man was with the official in the bank, talking. Two people were at the registers, and three people were waiting in line. Pat and Ed got in line.

"Why do we have to get in line!" Ed demanded.

"Because it's rude to do it any other way. It's not civilized."

The woman at one register announced that all cash withdrawals had to be done at the other register. The three people waiting in line ahead of Pat and Ed moaned and shifted over. The person the woman had been helping left, and Pat and Ed stepped up to the register.

"Hello," Pat said, reaching into his jacket, "I need a loan—"

Suddenly, the front doors burst open and two men in ski masks rushed in. They both had pistols, and were waving them around wildly.

"Everybody down! This is a stickup."

"Stickup?" Ed asked.

"Dammit, get down before I blow your brains out!"

The robber was aiming about three feet to the left of Ed.

"You see Uncle Pat, this is what we should have done."

"What, robbed the bank?"

"Shut up, both of you! You!" he said to the lady at the register, "where's the vault?"

The lady pointed, and one robber with a black bag went to open it. The woman at the register smiled and stepped on the silent alarm.

"What're you smiling at!"

"Nothing," she smiled.

There was a loud bang. The second robber returned.

"We did it, we're in!"

"Good," the first said, "now unload the cash."

"What?! You unload the cash. I'll watch them."

"That wasn't the agreement."

"There was no agreement!"

"I signed an oral contract—"

"How did you do that!"

"Shut up, I'll kill you!"

"Then who will watch these people while you load up the cash?"

"You mean, who will watch these people while you load up the cash!"

They both stared at each other. The lady behind the register snickered behind her bulletproof glass. The first robber heard and pointed the gun at her.

"What was that?"

"Oh, nothing," she said with a smile.

"Why don't we rob the people too!"

"Shut up and load up the bags!" the first robber said, throwing a pack of garbage bags at the second robber.

"Fine, but I'll remember this."

"No you won't!"

The robber dragged out two bags filled with cash.

"Ok, we got the money, let's run."

"Run? You mean drive?"

"We walked here you idiot!"

"We'll steal a car."

"From who?"

"One of these chumps!"

"What!"

"It's better than walking around with two trash bags filled with money."

Ed and Pat stared.

"Uh, you can use my truck."

The robbers both turned their heads.

"What?"

"Here," Pat said, pulling out the keys and tossing them to the robbers. "It's the white truck outside."

The robbers both turned their heads the other way.

"Okay, we'll take your truck," the first one said.

"But they'll know!"

"They know anyway you idiot!"

"What do we do with them then?"

"Hey, why don't we throw them in the vault"

"Ok chumps, on your feet."

Nine people got up and filed into the vault.

"Okay, now we're going to leave you here. The police will come and free you. But none of you saw us, okay? That's the story, okay? You just, um, wandered, into the vault, and door closed—"

Pat and Ed sat down as the vault door closed.

"You gave them the truck?" Ed asked.

"Don't worry, Fred's onto us now."

"Fred? Oh no."

"Don't worry, I said Fre—"

"I know what you said, that's why I said 'oh no.'"

"What are you guys talking about," the man across from them asked. He was dressed in a long wool coat. Some kind of badge hung around his neck under his scarf. He exuded calm, and spoke with the gentle voice of a hypnotist.

"Well, it's a long story. Besides," Pat started, staring at him.

"You wouldn't believe us," Ed finished.

"My name is Peter. I'm a doctor in town."

"I'm Pat, this is my business partner Ed." Ed rolled his eyes.

"So, the story?"

"Are you sure? You won't believe us."

"Try me."

Outside, they suddenly heard the muffled sounds of sirens and screeching tires.

"Oh no!" the first robber cried out.

"Oh we're so fucked!" the second cried out.

"Calm down!"

"Oh God, we're screwed, we're screwed, we're going to jail, and then we're really screwed! Oh God!"

"Calm down, stay here! I'll take care of this."

"What do you mean! They have guns! They're gonna shoot us, then we're gonna get screwed! You know what they do with people like us? They screw us!"

"We have guns too!"

"Oh but I don't know how to use mine! I just bought it last week, and the lady offered to show me, but I was too embarrassed to ask, so—"

"I hate you so much! Just shut up and make sure the chumps don't try to escape. Car doors slammed outside as the police took up positions.

"So," Pat began, "we were driving down a road one cold winter when suddenly, suddenly, there was something in the road, and I had to swerve to avoid hitting it, and our truck skidded off the road."

When the Channel 4 van arrived, Wilder stopped it in it's tracks.

"Whoa, whoa, ifeet isn't Ms. Hayley Whitaker he'self. Whe'as you runnin' off too so quickly."

"You know Wilder. Come one, we go back. Let me just have a couple shots."

"And you know I can't allow that. But maybe you can pa'h'k round back of my cruiser there and fi'lm. 's'long as you stay back now. Wouldn't want the star news'e'po't'a'h getting shot o' something. Mm, and maybe you cou'd, get me on TV pe'h'h'aps?"

Hayley told the driver to pull the van behind Wilder's car, then she got out and grabbed her microphone, yelling at the cameraman.

"Ok, ready, on, uh, three? Two."

Hayley paused.

"I'm here, live, in front of the First State National United Bank, where I'm told that an armed robbery is currently in progress. From where I am, I can see two men armed with pistols. There are bags of money on the floor, and no one else is in site. Wait, something happening. It seems that one of the men has noticed us, and is pointing wildly and jumping up and down."

The second robber screamed.

"We're screwed, and it's going to be televised!"

"Here with me is Lieutenant Wilder, who arrived shortly upon the scene. Lieutenant, what can you tell me about what has happened, and what will happen."

The first robber ran to the TV in the bank lobby and turned it on.

"Well, appa'ently these two chuckleheads decided to rob the bank, but the silent ala'm was tripped, and here we'ah."

"Yes," Hayley said, "and what will happen next?"

"Well, fi'hsta'v'all we'e gonna wait. And then the SWAT teams a'h gonna get he'e, including o'a'h pol'ice negotiato', who will then proceed, to uh, negotiate with these guys, because a'bovall, we want a peaceful resolution whe'e no one gets hu'ht."

Hayley gave the cutoff.

"Thanks Hayley."

"They were watching that Wilder."

"Yeah, I know. Our negotiato' is at some piano concert with his gi'hlfriend. He ain't comin."

"I see."

Two SWAT vans pulled up. The captain got out and immediately headed towards Hayley.

"Why hello there Ms. Whitaker. It's very, very nice to see you again."

Hayley rolled her eyes in disgust.

"You look fine in that reporter getup. Kind of kinky, I'd say. In fact, I'd say it's kinda sexy."

Hayley crossed her arms.

"Say, I was thinking, this will be over pretty quickly seeing as me and my squad will take care of these guys, so afterwards maybe you and I can—"

"I don't think so."

"What's the matter honey, you're going to miss out. I have a search warrant with your name on it, and it says to give you hot sweet lovin."

Hayley gave him the finger.

"Whoops," she said, adjusting herself. She stuck out her fourth finger. "That's what I meant. See? Ring."

"Oh."

The captain looked dismayed, and glanced at Wilder momentarily.

"Uh, I'll, uh, prep my squads for entry. Yeah."

The captain walked away.

Wilder chuckled. Alpha squad poured out of one van. A hotdog vendor stopped around the corner and looked at all the commotion.

"Wilder, tell me when you guys are about to go, ok?"

"I'd say about another five minutes here. When you see the SWAT guys moving out—"

"Gotcha. Thanks."

"Hal, keep filming."

The cameraman nodded, and Hayley went to the squadcar to talk to Wilder.

"So where are the supposed hostages?"

Wilder was eyeing the hotdog stand anxiously. Hayley snapped her fingers. He came to attention, blinking and confused, and answered her question.

"Uh, I think they'an the vault."

"I see."

"And these two?" she asked, pointing to the squirming robbers.

"Dunno. As fa'hsa I can tell, jes stupid college students."

"Well I'm going to broadcast the 'negotiation,' ok?"

"Mmmhm," he said. He exhaled in the cold.

Hayley walked back to the van and told Hal to link to the station. She watched the bank for a while, until she saw the nervous captain approach Wilder again. Then she motioned to her cameraman, and began rolling.

"This is Hayley Whitaker, reporting outside the First State National United Bank, where a standoff is occurring between law enforcement officers and two robbers, who are holding several people hostage inside. A special tactics negotiator is being sent in momentarily to negotiate a treaty."

Two loud bangs and a chorus of yelling and screaming, were heard behind her. Smoke poured and alarms rang.

"It seems that the situation has become more complicated than we originally thought. It looks as if a SWAT team has entered the building— yes, and now they are exiting. And they have successfully apprehended the suspects in question. I didn't hear shots fired, I repeat, I didn't hear any shots fired, but the situation

seems to be under control. Channel 4 will have complete updates to this harrowing situation as it continues. Live at the First State National United Bank, I'm Hayley Whitaker."

She motioned for a voice cut and watched the robbers getting dumped by the van. Another small team of mostly police officers moved into the bank to free the hostages. Other news vans, which had gathered farther away down the street began inching closer. Hayley motioned to Wilder, who was eyeing the hotdog stand again.

"Anyway I could get an interview with the hostages?"

"Oh, idunno Ms. Hayl'e, that might be difficult. But, uh, maybe on'er two may wand'a'h yo'h way hm?"

"Thanks Wilder."

"Hey, I owe you one, remember?"

Hayley caught up to the nearest hostage, and briefly talked to him, taking him by one arm and bringing him to the camera.

"Hi! I'm Hayley Whitaker from Channel 4 news—"

"But, I was going to go—"

"Right, but if you step this way, I'd like to ask you some questions. What's your name?"

"Peter, but those guys—" he said, staring after Pat and Ed, who were being questioned by Wilder.

"For those of you at home who have just tuned in, this is Peter, uh, Peter?"

"Ignatius."

"Peter Ignatius, who, just moments ago, was being held hostage inside the First State National United Bank by two armed robbers. He was just freed by local SWAT team members who apprehended the robbers without any shots fired. Peter, can you tell us, in your own words, what happened?"

"Well, I was going in to make a deposit when two armed men burst in. They blew open the vault, took out the money in bags, and then forced us into the vault. We waited until we heard the SWAT team, then we were set free."

"That must have been quite an ordeal."

Peter stared at Hayley. His only thought was that she looked smarter than to be asking questions like that.

"Uh, sure."

"A story with a happy ending. Back to you Clark."

Hayley gave the cutoff, and Hal put down the camera. She turned and faced Peter.

"Look, I'm sorry about those dumb questions, but, you know."

"Yeah, sure, I understand."

"Just one of my own personal question. What did you guys do in that vault? It was a pretty long stand off."

"Well, one guy peed in a bag," Peter said with a laugh.

"Oh, alright."

"I, well, I listened to a story. Quite an incredible story, I think. Told by those two," Peter said, motioning at Pat and Ed.

"A story?"

"Well, I'm kind of an amateur keeper of stories. It turns out that everyone has some good stories to tell. Hayley was it?"

"Yes, Hayley. Here's my business card. You might be surprised. Even someone as boring as me may have a few stories to tell."

"I bet," Peter said. There was an awkward moment when the two were alone. Peter saw something in her eye, some deep hurt. So, carefully and slowly as not to scare her, he reached out and touched her cheek gently with two fingers. Waves of emotion washed over him, deep and sad, but he forced back with hope and peace.

"What was that!" she said, abruptly, pulling back.

"I'm sorry, I—"

"Don't do that again. Not without telling me first."

Peter bowed his head.

"I'm sorry."

She stared back at him.

"No, I'm sorry," she said. "I got caught off guard. I've been working a little overtime I suppose."

"Go home Hayley Whitaker. Take a rest."

Hayley watched Peter walk away with a half smile on his face, and suddenly her face brightened a little too. *What an odd guy.* All around her, a feeling of peace lingered, like a scent. She

breathed in the cold winter air, and motioned to her cameraman to pack up.

Peter had seen everything inside of Hayley, if only for a brief moment. Of love lost, gained, and then love taken away by fate. Peter had seen the human heartache, and it reminded him of Claire, so long ago. He felt a surge of nausea, and the instinct to vomit. He rushed to a side alley, and threw up into a trash can. Behind him, he heard a noise.

Wiping his mouth, he walked unsteadily down the back alley, following the dim noise through a maze of strange corridors filled with trash and neglect. Finally, he came to a dead end, where he beheld something that struck him like lightning.

Pat and Ed were talking to a Yeti.

A giant, big, white, furry, Yeti.

"Thanks Fred, but the police could have taken care of it."

The Yeti shrugged almost, and gurgled with a childish grin on his face. Peter stood with his mouth agape.

"Holy shit!"

All three turned, and the Yeti gave a small growl.

"Holy shit!" Peter repeated.

"Whoa, whoa, Pete, it's okay man. It's Fred. Remember? From the story."

"Oh—I, oh, I thought it was a story. Just a story, but, big, and here, bu—, oh."

"Yeah that's the normal reaction," Pat said.

Peter fumbled for words. Ed approached him and tugged him closer to the giant beast, who was staring down at him with gentle eyes. It purred.

"Uh, right—h,h,h—hi?"

Fred gurgled back and bear hugged Peter, enclosing him with giant furry arms.

"Yeti—crushing—"

"Fred! Let him go."

Fred made a noise and dropped Peter, who fell to the floor.

"Look, Peter, this is probably hard to explain. Why don't I leave you our number, and someday when the shock wears off, we can talk about this huh?"

"Yeah, I'll, uh, write down, your story, it'll— it's a good story. Bu, bu, bi, bu."

Pat scribbled the family home number on a piece of paper and gave it to Peter's shaking hands.

"It was nice to meet you!" Ed said, waving goodbye as the three wandered away back into the maze of alleys. Peter stared blankly back.

"Okay," he murmured to himself, "that was new."

He picked himself off the ground, and wandered back towards the bank. Wilder found him.

"Hey budah, you dunluk so good the'a's"

"I'm ok. I just, I think I hit my head or something."

Hayley saw him talking to Wilder and came over.

"Are you alright Peter?"

"Um, yeah, I think I'm just a little dazed."

"I'll give you a ride back then," she said with a wink.

Peter stared back blankly.

A Yeti?

"I'm going to start writing this stuff down."

"What stuff?" Hayley asked.

"Stories people tell me. True stories."

"Like today?"

"Yeah, like today."

Hayley nodded and opened the door.

"Anything else?" she asked.

"Yeah. I'm going to stop drinking from now on."

The van started up, and drove away. The robbers sat in the SWAT van, handcuffed, staring at each other.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well, what do you think now you dumbass!"

The second one looked outside.

"I wonder what's taking those police officers so long."

"I hate you. So. Much."

Veritos

This, this is a story about truth. Actually it's a story about lies. But that too is a lie, and a truth. Actually, this is a story about a man named Peter Ignatius who was looking for lies and accidentally found the truth and was so scared by it that he turned it into a lie. But that too is a lie.

This is a story mostly about how James O'Riley threw himself off the clock tower one day, or how a Yeti saved Pat and Ed from the future. But those are lies. What isn't a lie is how Michael Verm fought in the Canadian War with Kay Morson, who couldn't shoot Private McBride.

But what is a lie is how there is no Kay Morson, no Private McBride, no Canadian War- at least not yet. And if you were to ask Peter Ignatius about Michael Verm, he would say that the story is too funny to tell, and at the same time too heartbreaking to hear.

This is a love story about a cowboy bar in Jemez where it all began, where a pretty girl named Claire once went fishing, and then two years later did not die in Peter Ignatius' arms. Instead, she simply turned into six letters carved into a smudge of sky blue at the edge of a novel of love and labor, one that crumbled and rebuilt itself over and over until even Peter couldn't distinguish which stories were true and which stories were false.

But that's all true.

This story begins, like all good stories do, in a dark alley, where steam rises from a dark grate on the street and the sound of car horns echo through the grimy mazes of cobblestone. Pat looked to Fred, who gurgled merrily back at him, and Ed could only sigh miserably as they made their way back to the truck and their home beyond.

"Tell me about college," she said, and Peter could only stare back because he was thinking how pretty she looked driving the car, the slits of sunlight smoothly gliding across her face.

"College? College I couldn't believe that story either."

"Tell me about it."

"There was a vampire named Vlad."

"A vampire?"

"The man had classes at night, and he slept during the day, and he was Russian, and he had *fangs*."

Hayley briefly glanced at him as the van pulled up to his house.

"Tell me about it sometime Peter."

She slipped her business card into his hand, and with a wink she was gone, like in those stories of old where the pretty girls disappear in and out with nothing more than winks.

And Peter stood in his driveway for a long while and tried to pretend like he was winking back at her. Time went on, as stories do, and before he knew it Peter was standing at Hayley's door, pretending to wink at her and accidentally doing so when she opened it.

And she winked back.

So Peter told her about college. About a vampire named Vlad, and Mike who stole oranges, and the people who he knew who must have been lies. Interestingly enough, these people are real and true- and Peter Ignatius and Hayley Whitaker are torn fragments of reality being slowly assembled on a laptop by Mike who stole oranges. But that doesn't make them fake.

They had dinner, and it was magnificent, mostly because neither of them were cooking, and neither of them had a shortage of stories to tell. Peter told her a story of Pat and Ed and Fred, two simple men and a Yeti who defied time and logic to save themselves from a temporal causality loop. And then starred in a big movie.

And Hayley told Peter of two kids who came by looking for the legend of the sun and stars; two kids whose eyes could turn you to stone but whose hearts could tear stone to dust. And it was a sad story to tell and to listen to.

Then Peter told her the second saddest story he knew, about James O'Riley, who in college didn't exist, but somehow still managed to throw himself off the clock tower one day.

"James O'Riley was a joke that we made up to mess around with people who came to our room. We put his name up on the sign on our front door, and when people asked we would half-jokingly say that he was our eighth suitemate who accidentally got locked up in the clock tower and eventually decided to simply throw himself off.

"The only problem was that we told it to so many people, so much, that eventually the lie became more real than the truth ever could have been. There never was James O'Riley, but suddenly there he was, from Lexington, Massachusetts, who played tennis well and had dark hair.

"Somehow, we began to love the story, and treat it as a story that is true but you embellish a little. We told little things about James O'Riley, and we toasted to James O'Riley, until one day it was suddenly too close to the truth. And we tore down our sign, and tore down the lie, or truth, or whatever it had become. And Mike didn't lie anymore after that. He just stole. Oranges."

And Hayley stared at Peter and something in his eyes broke her, left her hurting and empty, and she blinked and stared away. Peter asked her if he could try to express something, and she

agreed. He reached with two fingers and gently touched her temple, giving her the emotions and impressions of his entire life, a ruinous jumble of second-hand misery and suddenly, for a blink like creation, a beautiful moment, brief and beautiful, but then gone.

She drew back, somewhat surprised, and then stared at him.

"Tell me the saddest story you know," she said.

"Some other day," he replied.

The horrible truth is- Peter Ignatius had spent most of his life collecting stories. Stories which are by no means true, yet by no means false. All stories are like that, or so Mike who stole oranges would tell you one day. It was only five years ago that Mike who stole oranges took a story about a cowboy bar in Jemez, and from those first words blossomed a word which he then populated with people, lives, places, and events- even a storyteller.

So the horrible truth is that Peter Ignatius is really Mike who stole oranges, and Mike who stole oranges is really Peter Ignatius. And the most horrible lie of all is that I actually did go to a cowboy bar in Jemez once.

A few days later, Peter visited one Michael Verm (not to be confused with Mike who stole oranges). Michael Verm was a patient of the hospital being treated with unknown injuries and most importantly an incredible case of delusion.

Peter sat down, and touched Michael Verm's forehead and gave him peace like Claire showed him once to do, and from that Peter was given a whole new world to explore. From there the stories of Kayson Morson, a soldier in a war that would never happen yet would never be any less real than any of the other stories that populated Peter's journal.

Peter sat down and wrote of how Kayson could not shoot the green-shelled man, of how Kayson fell in love in a small town and then died in the arms of his love in a small town- and all of that is heroic and poetic, and mostly melodramatic with literary cubic zirconia thrown in for brilliance. But it was all a lie- a good one too; Mike who stole oranges was able to flesh out the story and breathe

into it life. He even made Michael Verm stroll into a cowboy bar in Jemez.

So Peter went back to Hayley and told her the story of Michael Verm, and wrote it down in his book. He wrote down the story of Pat and Ed, who were guarded by a Yeti named Fred. He wrote down the ridiculous concoction of a chile-lover, and then he wrote an even more ridiculous concoction about Byron, who ran away from Michael Verm's war, running free of the pages of Peter's book and away into the sky where Claire was carved.

Peter wrote about a nameless man who took his girlfriend to a Prokofiev concert and woke up remembering why he loved her. Peter wrote about the lives of four teenagers he had seen in a car accident that never happened anywhere. He wrote down Hayley's saddest story, and even wrote down some stories that belonged to no one but him.

He wrote them down in what he first called the Verm Chronicles, then just the Chronicles, then just Chronicalia, thinking that by capturing pieces of imagination he could somehow bind them together and create a totally new world, devoid of human misgivings of his world. But then, for some reason, I remembered James O'Riley, who threw himself off a clock tower. And then Peter stopped writing them down.

"I've stopped writing them down."

Hayley stared back.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because they're lies."

"To who?" she asked.

"Mostly to me."

Hayley thought about this, stirring a cup of coffee meaninglessly. She got up and returned to mug to her sink, and without looking back at Peter, destroyed the Chronicalia.

"They're lies because they're stories. Some of them are bad stories, and some of them are good stories, but they're all stories, and all stories are lies."

Peter sat quietly in thought while Hayley continued.

"So stop writing. You don't need to stuff everything into this one story, this one big world that keeps expanding and getting more and more outrageous. You can write about what's *real*, and they may still be lies because they are stories- but they'll be true stories at the very least."

Mike who stole oranges blinked at his laptop and stared at the sky- where clouds floated by- but there was no name carved there.

So Peter stopped writing in the Chronicalia. He shut down his lie, and wrote a story about a robbery of a bank, which Hayley declined to comment on. In this story he finished the last connections and shut down the world which he had created. But Hayley still asked him occasionally what his saddest story was.

Peter's saddest story is sad, I think. Claire, who gave him the gift to see the worlds that people create, died not in his arms but sometime away with pushing breaths. Claire did not die in his arms, but she gave him her last real breath, a pushing breath that she pushed into him, a weak gift of compressed life, a life compressed into a frail arm leaning against you, frail eyes leaning into you, and a frail breath pushing inside you.

Peter told her that last story. And it was his last story.

Mike who stole oranges snapped one day. He drew faces on the oranges, and talked to them. He never ate the one with faces. He called that cannibalism, though with normal oranges he carefully peeled off the rind in one sadistic piece.

Mike who stole oranges snapped because one day Vlad stole all of Mike's oranges, took them up to the clock tower, and threw Mike's slowly rotting friends out the window, where they splattered onto the ground, their marker-faces ripped apart by the impact. It wasn't really the fact that he had thrown regular oranges out- it was the fact that Vlad had thrown dark haired James O'Riley off the clock tower.

So Peter was done telling stories of crazy places and worlds, and Hayley, who some crazy feminist will say is a stereotypical literary woman character, was done asking Peter for stories. The truth is, Hayley is just the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, and though we only spoke to each other maybe four or five times, that lingering image of a shy shock of black hair has left scar tissue at the tips of my fingers that aches with every Hayley I type. Though she was just some poor used girl in some poor used story, she is still stronger than any Peter Ignatius, Pat and Ed, or Michael Verm, because unlike them *she is real*.

And Peter? Peter is just a name. My name is Mike, and I steal oranges.

And Claire? Claire is just a name carved in the sky.

The saddest story I've ever heard is too sad to even mention. But when you sit and listen and cry because his story is sad and worse, true, you know that your stories, no matter how sad, will always be just stories- while the man who is your friend sitting in front of you is not telling you a story, or a tale, or an account of an event. No- the man sitting in front of you with a straight face is telling you the truth.

And then your truth dissolves.

So it's up to me now to finish what Peter began, or really what I began. It's not that I don't want to continue, since I do, but rather it's a matter of truth and lies. What I've done so far is tell you one big lie, over and over again, feeding you bits and pieces from the same lie. And I don't want to switch to another lie and feed you more- I want to feed you my lies and hope you find the truth.

I want to continue on. I want to make Peter and Hayley fall in love, because that would be oh so convenient, and would make me happy because that would mean that I could fall in love with Hayley. But I can't.

So I will continue, just not in this way. No more bits and pieces of a story that will never be finished no matter how many people I put in it. I'm finishing Peter's story in this fashion because I want there to be room for more. Not a sequel- or another chronicle-

because this is the last chronicle. No- the next time, when Peter reawakens, he will stop being an illusion that I'm trying to believe in- he'll be a belief that I'm trying to create an illusion around.

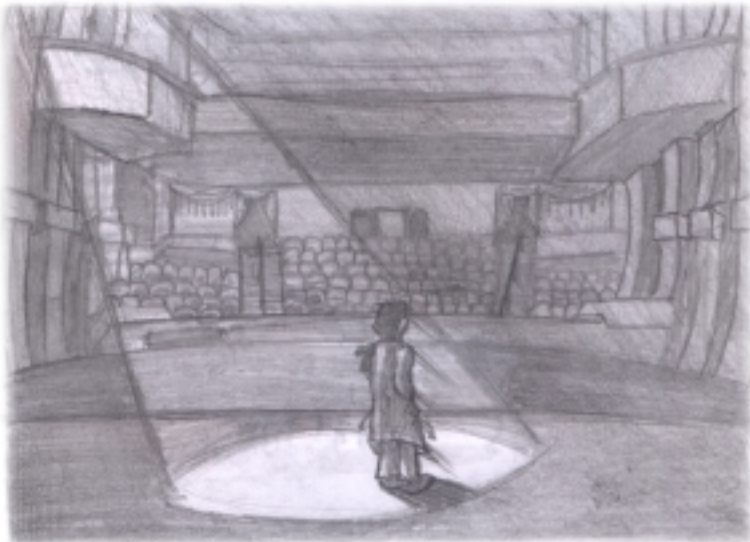
Peter Ignatius will be back. But for now, I'll let this lie dissolve, this chronicle, this bridge onto more than just a new style, a new layout, a pretty new picture. I can't erase Claire from the sky because it's written in pen. So I'll keep staring at the sky and I'll keep writing, and from six letters derive truth.

But this lie, this truth, this five year dream will be put to rest and it will stop breaking my heart and no one else's.

The Last Chronicle will consume the ones before it, and they will, as all good lies (and truths) do, gently and silently fall apart.

And the next time I wake up, I'll pick up the pieces and try again.

Today



A Night of Prokofiev

It was a cold night, the kind of cold that goes beyond chilling your bones. The dark night seemed to have been woven with barely transparent threads of cold. It was the kind of night where I swear I could have reached out and shattered a tiny strand of frost. It was the kind of night that I wasn't surprised when my car didn't start.

My pride was beat up and locked in a deep recess in my brain; it was given a cold night off. With my pride gone, I allowed Shelly to drive, though a chivalrous memory kicked my frontal lobe the entire way. In fact, as I'm writing this, a feminist critic is probably

planning my assassination. Those were the strange thoughts that ran-Godzilla rampant- in my head. My eyes wandered their own lazy way to rest upon Shelly, who in a far too gorgeous black dress looked like a ghost emerging from a dark shell of disbelief. She looked stunning. My id, while still dodging the critic's bullets, still cherishes that image every time I think of that night.

As we got out from her truck, the cold smacked us, mocking us for our inhuman foolishness. As we walked, that resonance of a gentleman gained a minor victory as I wrapped my coat around Shelly's bare shoulders. We walked side by side, without touching.

"Cold, isn't it."

"Yeah, sure is," she replied. We walked a little faster towards the hall.

"Shelly, what would you think if I said I was going to become a writer?"

The lobby was a crammed mass of aristocracy and dresses. The bright lights glared off a thousand balding heads. Shelly walked eyes forward, so quiet that for a moment I thought she hadn't heard a word.

"Well that'd be interesting, but it certainly has risks as well as benefits."

Shelly's all-knowing. She taught me how to spell the word 'no':

Wellthatdbeinterestingbutitcertainlyhasrisksaswellasbenefits

I gave a few hello nods to some people who recognized me, but of course, I didn't recognize any of them.

"What would you write about?" she asked.

"Anything. Everything. Stuff like this."

"This?" she echoed. Her eyes pitched playfully, and a twisting, too-charming smile almost appeared at her lips. It infected my heart and opened my own smile.

"Hey, this might not sound too exciting, but I suppose that every event, even boring stuff like this, has its little moments. Like when you just smiled. That was worth a paragraph."

Ok maybe a sentence or two.

"Yeah, but are you going to write a novel about little things like that?"

The question struck me into thinking. After all, it seemed that a lot of big-time novels had been about big-time stuff. War. Depression. Great human tragedies and hopes. No one had ever written a book on Shelly's smile, though at the time my foolish heart whispered the thought.

We checked our tickets and were ushered, coincidentally, by an usher, to our seats. I sat down and looked at her.

"Little stuff counts too doesn't it?" Through these centuries, literature and language has evolved, but always in little steps.

"Sure, like what?"

"If that pianist misses a chord here and there, a few notes out of tens of thousands, it might seem little. But those few notes might mean the difference between a concert pianist and someone not quite there."

Shelly was a dancer, and was probably thinking what would happen if she missed a little step.

As we thought, a triumphant A rang from the stage, followed by a growing cacophony; each note beginning at some chaotic depths and rising to hit 440 Hz of pure, wonderful music. I didn't even know what they were playing. Staring dumbly down at the program I read 'Prokofiev,' accompanied by a picture of the composer. I glanced at Shelly, who was gently rubbing her still cold fingers together as a rosy blush graced her cheeks.

The first few notes of the symphony began, stringing merrily away at the music, tearing at pages of notes with the derived sweetness of the appropriately entitled Classical Symphony. Sweet notes slid through my brain and echoed around. Not through emptiness, but rather dense ignorance. The next work was more dissonant and playful, strange rhythms that churned with a mechanical beauty, like a well built car engine. All throughout I crept little glances over at Shelly, who finally caught me close to intermission and shot back that mischievous "I caught you" smile.

Intermission came, and we were swept outside with the sea of people, and we wandered until we found a secluded bench.

"That was pretty good," I said. Shelly laughed and gave me a gentle punch.

"Critics usually pay attention."

"I was paying attention."

"To what?" she said. Right then, I saw the entire universe and me; myself a little speck and around an ocean of people laughing at me.

"To whatever deserved the attention."

She blushed again, this time there was no cold to blame.

"Maybe you could write criticism."

"Yeah but critics are always so negative to writers!" Bang bang.

"You could be the first nice one."

"I could be the first one fired too. People are negative. They don't want to hear 'this was great' over and over."

"I do," she said.

As we headed back to our seats, Shelly leaned against me ever so slightly, and slung her arm into mine so that we looked like old English royalty entering a castle. That was my thought anyway. Shelly must have had something a little more comical in mind, for she nearly burst into laughter as we sat down. She leaned against me and I held onto her. It was one of those moments that is so clear that even in a faulty human memory, you can feel the person next to you, and you can feel your heart.

The first passage of the next piece was monumentally romantic, a piano concerto that gently closed first her eyes, then mine. I saw in my mind the whole orchestra playing for just us, minus the rest of the audience. Thankfully the image didn't borrow other subconscious ideas I had gathered: I wasn't giving a speech to a tuba player in his underwear.

Forgive me Shelly!

In the world of little things, problems arose.

First, in a small town
In South America, a
butterfly flapped its
wings, causing a gust
thousands of miles
away that toppled a
large tree into a power
line, which crashed to
the ground, sparking.

A hundred or so heart
cells sitting in Row 4
Seat 23Q forgot to fire
for a few fractions of a
second. Their owner,
Samuel Onsly quickly
grasped his left arm,
collapsing in his seat,
his arms flailing wildly.

The first people
To notice the flailing
Mr. Onsly were, sadly
Enough, the pianist
And the first violinist
who missed their next
notes by just a few Hz,
and ended up just too
dissonant sounding.

On oak street, lived
Nathan Eastman. He
Remembered what he
Forgot to do before
He went home sick.
Those emergency
EXIT sign light bulbs
In the had burned out
And he had forgotten
To replace them. Oops.

As the hall plunged into visual darkness, an acoustic screen of voices and screams filled the gap, punctuated by a deep floundering trumpet blast by a startled brass player.

I nudged Shelly, who had been sleeping tranquilly with a beauty that almost brings a tear to my eye. Almost. She woke with a start. All the doors were dark, with the only emergency lighting on the floor covered by stampeding feet. She grabbed my hand and stood, watching the crowd panic. Pulling me forward, she led us as we waded through the crowd. The tuba player was giving emergency CPR to Samuel Onsly.

"Here, look a side exit," she said, yanking me towards a small room. Behind me, the loud darkness buzzed. Inside was a small man, who turned around with a start. He was short, balding, and gnome-like with mad-scientist glasses and an evil smile that sent a shiver down a spine. I recognized the face.

"Prokofiev?"

"Why did you sleep?" he yelled in Russian.

"What, I-"

"Why did you sleep during my concert?" He drew closer, menacing, his eyes glaring and gleaming. Behind I heard Sam Onsly moaning and a few violinists trying to play to calm the panicking audience. They were trampling and crushing each other in a frenzy to escape.

"You slept during my concert? My concert!"

He raised his fists and I stepped back.

"No Prokofiev!" I yelled.

Everyone looked at me, staring. They were all standing, at the end of a long applause.

"Uh...no Prokofiev...was ever that brilliant."

I had fallen asleep to the tragic harmonies of Prokofiev, my dreams filled with a drama and a strange vibrant sadness that I only imagined. I woke up to a world where nothing had gone wrong. It was Shelly's world, where hope still lingered in dark corners, begging to be uncovered.

Sam Onsly's heart cells gave me a sneering look as they passed, mirroring the look of Sam Onsly's eyes as they walked by.

The lights in the hall still glared, the EXIT signs shone, and Shelly was laughing at me as I walked with her into the lobby, my half-awake mind looking for ambulances and half-clothed people with tubas.

"You fell asleep."

I didn't answer.

"Didn't you?"

"Well, uh, um, well, I-"

She kissed me then, a fleeting quick kiss that left a sweet scent in my mind and a gaping, yearning whole in my heart. She tugged at my arm.

"Come on sleepy."

"Ok I fell asleep. But I dreamed of little things. Th-they were, big, too."

"Little, big things. Uh huh. And you want to be a writer?"

I nodded like an idiot. At the thought of writing I saw a crowd of angry feminists, senior citizens, tuba players, and giant heart cells, all goaded on by an enraged but laughing Sergei Prokofiev.

Shelly saw my dumb look.

"Just promise me you won't write anything super-cheesy, like 'and then he woke up!' That stuff is just horrible. Promise me you won't write crap like that."

"I won't. And if I do, say accidentally, then I'll beg your divine forgiveness, your majesty."

I did a little half-bow as we went back through the lobby towards the cold evening. We stepped into the darkness, and I thought I could hear the little strings of frigid night still humming with Prokofiev's notes.

We walked slowly back, my coat again on her shoulders, the fresh air finally cleaning out the rubbish of dreams lodged in my head. People streamed by in a rush to get away and move on. And, even though it wasn't quite so cold anymore, I felt a warmth press against me as Shelly slipped her hand into mine, a small embrace. As we walked, the night was quiet behind us, and the wind wasn't quite so bitter.

The Anatomy of Sunshine

Noon came and went with all its oddities. Hayley Whitaker decided to drive home for lunch that day. She drove onto the highway through cement forests and steelwork deserts, oceans of asphalt and tiny little cars swarming everywhere. The highway was half closed for construction, and anger and obscenities were as jam-packed as impatience and cars with the midday sun bright and glaring on that cloudless day, shining equally on all.

Hayley drove home to avoid that dreadful lunch with Dalton. She hoped to eat and stay home to think alone, with nothing more on her mind than how long to microwave the popcorn. She and Dalton usually met at Cooper's to eat lunch in the weepy canopy of an oversized umbrella. Thoughts of hate filled her mind, of betrayal against all she had guarded against. Never before, except once had the inner cloister of her heart been so profoundly broken. That once

didn't even have a face and barely a name, which was faded with time and heartbreak.

One year ago, almost exactly, that name had sent her his last letter, spilling his great love for her out upon the paper in beautiful streaks of deep blue and maddeningly gorgeous curves of minute detail. The words confessed his feelings and thoughts and love. Then there was a goodbye, a call to departure in beautiful poetic heartfelt prose that left her on her couch, as crumpled, torn, and tear stained as his last letter. That was her one and only true love, and he had slipped away quietly into the night on the wings of ink and sorrow. Dalton held her still for the first time that night when she had lain not able to move, paralyzed by fear and hate. Suddenly, in her mind that watershed moment for her heart became a double tragedy.

She drove endlessly towards home, slogging through the bright mud of midday that bogged her down in a dull mire of boredom. Construction was bad, she thought, and her lunch at home would have to be quick if she were to make it back in time. As that thought crossed her mind she broke free of the grasp of the traffic jam and sped down the concrete path in her car at an increasingly terrifying speed. The sun was high in the sky with no clouds, and looking at it for a moment, Hayley thought it looked strange. She turned to glance at the odd sun for one moment, and she looked back up just in time to see the rear end of the car which she slammed into.

Hayley had hoped for a respite in her life, but never had expected it to come from such a strange quarter as familiarity. But then came the news that for almost one year now Dalton had been falling in love with her; as if he had fallen down a deep crevice of fate and fortune and had not been lucky or brave enough, until last night, to hit the bottom. Dalton was just a friend, or a roommate and best friend, or just a little bit more when fate dealt the other an ugly card. That night he touched her face gently like the time her dog had died or her mother passed, or the countless other atrocities of fate that caused him to fall more and more deeply down his ravine of amour. Only this time it was different, it wasn't the same Dalton, but a

changed one, as if some stranger had stolen his body. Of course last night was not a terrible stroke of fate or accident, but a bolt from the blue that struck Hayley's deep dark eyes from his lightning blue.

That night she had gone to sleep and tossed and turned in the grim clutches of some nightmare from which she could not escape. She hated this love which spited her. Why must the one person left to trust suddenly unmask himself as just another jester or specter of the future, drawn from the heaven's depths to hold her, comfort her, and suddenly turn evil and love her. Not a word, Hayley thought, had passed between Dalton since he had confessed his undying love with passionate words that were nothing more but a dull blur in Hayley's mind as she sat down on the couch and tried to cry out oh so badly for him to stop. There were no words in the morning, at breakfast, or upon leaving; there was no response from her or echo from him. For Hayley there was only the full expectation that when she returned that he would be gone, and once more another star would have faded on her horizon, only this time there would be no one to hold her carefully and tell her everything was alright. Yes, no one would say, fate was cruel, but giving up now would be crueler. Dalton was only again love's illusion, another demon sent to slay her with caring.

With that, Hayley cried herself to sleep, and when the morning came, tried to avoid Dalton in case another demon emerged. She was almost successful, but before she reached her car he was there, giving her only one glance before he left for work. She winced, probably noticeably, and a faint blush came to her milky face, like a reflection a crimson sunset. She had to remind herself that all he had ever done for her had been for himself, and that he was just an illusion of the night that would fade with morning. She went to work, driving along the crowded highway, where anger and obscenities were as jam-packed as impatience and cars with the rising sun bright and glaring on that cloudless day, shining equally on all.

The earth is a strange enough place as it is, and is made stranger by its simple relation to the rest of universe. For some reason, God ordained that from viewing on earth, the sun and moon should be approximately and eerily, the same size. It is strange that every rare century or decade or year, in some remote corner of earth, the heavens align and the moon fits over the sun like a terrible mask of darkness. The work of magicians, conjurers, Twain's and astronomers, dreamers and dream makers, have all been enlightened by the four minutes of darkness we call a total solar eclipse.

Modern man ought not be afraid of such an occurrence, yet in the dreamy eyes of those who have come before, the disappearance of the sun is absolutely terrifying when considered how much lies on the heavenly orb of fire. Yet, like some fluttering instant of weakness, the darkness passes, and we too, eventually return to the light that is sunshine.

As the airbag deflated, it left a sprinkle of white powder. A dazed Hayley sneezed rapidly and pushed back her short jet-black hair and carefully looked around, wondering exactly how long she had sat there dazed. As she sat there looking beautifully dazed, the window to her left boomed suddenly, and up against the window pressed the image of an elderly woman.

"Are you alright miss? Do you need an ambulance?" the elderly lady asked.

Hayley nodded at the first question and shook her head at the second. She felt a little dazed, but uninjured. She unbuckled her seatbelt and slowly clicked open the door. She was only a little bit taller than the short woman.

"I hit your car," Hayley began, "I-I'm sorry-"

"It's okay, I hit somebody else's," the lady responded with a half smile.

The lady took Hayley by the arm gently and led her onto the concrete median-like structure to their left. Hayley had been in the left lane. As she stood there, Hayley looked forward with awe. A line of cars stretched like a paralyzed, segmented chromatic serpent up and down the highway's half-finished steel and concrete

structures, stretching dozens of cars in front of and behind Hayley's own. She stood there, mouth open, more than slightly aghast. The sky turned a little darker.

"What happened?" asked a young man behind Hayley. He had been driving behind Hayley, and had hit her when she had stopped.

"Is anyone hurt?" Hayley asked.

"I don't hear any ambulances," the lady replied.

"Hey is it getting darker?" the man asked.

"Yeah," Hayley replied distractedly, her eyes turned upwards. Something was drawing itself over the sun like a divine shadow.

"An eclipse," the lady started. She stopped suddenly as the three of them watched the sky darken.

"Hey don't I know you?" asked the young man of Hayley.

"I-"

"Hayley!"

A yell came from in front of her, as a dark figure ran through a gaping crowd. Hayley stared, realizing that of the fifty or so people visible, only she and the approaching figure of Dalton did not have their eyes cast to the skies.

"Hayley! I-I was going to go home, I figured you would after last night. I'm sorry if I startled you, it's just that when I-"

He stopped, gasping for breath. The moon arced across the sun, sending shadows everywhere. It was like watching the sunset suspended in mid-sky. Only a sliver of luminescence remained, and everything became still and quiet like in the moments after dusk. It was nearly dark now and Hayley could only see Dalton's outline.

"I needed to talk to you," he continued, "so I thought to go home. I thought you would go home. I-I needed to tell you something important, something about what I said last night that-"

"Wh-what is it?" Hayley asked.

"You know, that one night where that man sent you that last letter and I held you and..., well that was me. I mean, it was me the entire time. My pen and handwriting and love. I mean, I didn't want or mean to deceive you, I just didn't know any other way to reach

you. But, but after that night we became friends and I didn't need that facade any longer. I didn't mean to hurt you I just-"

"You broke my heart," she replied, shocked and choking back a sob. "You broke my heart twice now, when I loved you twice."

The eclipse reached its zenith, and to those who looked upwards with heavy shades and protection on their eyes saw only fiery outline of the sun's corona, a brilliantly bright river running out from the black ocean of shadow that was the moon. Strands of gas and light flew out and ran outwards like thin strands of glowing sky that burned like a stream of continuous fire in the sky.

"I was a fool," Dalton said, "I am a fool. But I did what I did for love. Because..."

"I know," Hayley sighed. She wanted to hit him, kick and yell and scream and curse at him. All other eyes were turned upward, and she wanted to scream mutely and unheard how much he had hurt her. She knew he had been wrong, that he was a bastard for playing her heart like a cheap harpsichord. But as she looked inward in the darkness of noon, she still loved him.

The darkness stood silent as night, as unmovable as stone, with only that white ring of fiery light to illuminate Hayley as she let Dalton hold her, carefully at first and finally sinking into his arms to hold him back. As they kissed the sun finally broke free from its dim chains, sending the first glimmering rays of sunlight triumphantly past the vanquished moon to splatter gloriously on the earth.

"And one last news note tonight. A major car accident occurred on the highway today where major construction efforts have caused major traffic jams. The accident was massive, involving at least eighty-seven cars and over a hundred people. The accident was apparently caused by a complete solar eclipse that occurred at exactly 11:52 this morning. Most of the cars involved were on their lunch breaks, and were distracted by the darkening sky of the eclipse. Incredibly, despite the colossal magnitude of the accident, there were no injuries reported; everyone involved able to walk away unharmed. The people involved in the accident were treated to an

amazing view of the beautiful total solar eclipse. However as this reporter learned in person, it was not so terrible when the sun came out to shine again. I'm Hayley Whitaker, and for everyone here at Channel 4 news, goodnight."

Waiting

The pottery is quite nice. It's, well, kind of nestled off to the side. The entire place is bathed in light. I'm pretty anxious. After all, the pottery is quite nice. It's nestled off to the side, in a short corridor filled with light and plants. It's one of those days where every window becomes a showerhead of light. And, what do ya know, the pottery is in those glass cases, so I have to walk up close to get past the glaring panels.

I'm still waiting. They haven't called me in yet, but that's okay, I'm having what I guess you could call fun. The pottery is all made in the college, by students, and in fact there are a few lingering students at the end of the hall hard at work, listening to wiry music.

I move outside, pushing open the heavy door. It's the exact same temperature inside and out, not much of a difference anyways. It's pretty cool out, and I can feel the autumn, if not see it. There are

only evergreens all around. I wonder why they only have evergreens? Less yardwork probably.

Walking around, I see that nothing has changed since I walked this way just a few minutes ago. I was waiting then. It'll be a while, I suspect. Luckily, I have my water bottle, and I sip a few more sips, and soon, as the grass passes beneath me, it's empty once again. I brush my khakis again. It feels like I'm walking in circles, and I realize, I am.

I get bored of the spidery crosswalks, and move back inside. Stealing from the convention's bowl of candy, I walk through the sterile halls of the college. I can hear it from the auditorium, but I ignore it and move inside, where I wander the inside halls, down underneath the system. The cooks are preparing hundreds of meals for the convention dinner that night, and I sit in a chair and just smell the fresh bread baking for a while. I'm kind of hungry, actually, and all I have is candy and water. I refill my water bottle and move into the huge elevator.

That elevator must move some big stuff, because it's about four times bigger than the one in my hotel. Not that the one in my hotel is very impressive either.

Walk and sip, walk and sip.

Upstairs, I find something strange. A simulacrum of that lawn downstairs. Outside, on the roof of the building, a lawn flourishes, criss-cut with sidewalks and knifing slices of sunlight. I sit down in the shadows and drink some more before deciding to head back downstairs.

I'm kind of tired now, from walking and sipping, and from going to the bathroom and eating candy and watching the sun.

Each breath is labored.

My stomach must not like my meal, because it seems to be trying to escape my body. I manage to cram it back down with some willpower, but it doesn't feel much better.

Well.

I move back to the door of the auditorium, where the sounds of applause sound.

I wait.

The applause continues.

I have to follow that?

Is it me?

Or, is it just someone else. Or do I have to wait some more.

I walk over to my bench and put my water bottle down by my jacket, and turn off my cell phone. I put on my suit coat, and tuck my notes inside.

The double doors open, and a hush falls over the crowd. I look up, tilting my head to get a good view inside. They're saying my name, and a few of the people in the back of the packed auditorium look outside, towards me, craning their necks to get a view.

They're waiting.

"I guess that's me," I whisper.

I adjust my tie and my suit. They're giving me a fine introduction. I give one final longing look outside, and towards the hallway, where the pottery is still there, unmoved.

Who would plant a lawn on the roof? Not to mention with that kind of elevator?

"Oh," I sigh. I might as well forget dinner.

The pottery waited.

The First Rose

"There is always a first rose. One that blooms before the rest. One that is able to wake before all the others. The first rose will open its petals to the dawn before any others have even stirred. That first rose will always be the first to hear families awake in their homes. It will smell the fresh breath of morning's cool.

"Maybe, though, that first rose may also suffer its fate first. It will die while the other roses are still vibrant. With any luck, though, it will last to see the sun it awoke to fall down into the sky. Though that first rose may pass before any other, no one would ever say that it was any less beautiful."

Claire stopped and looked up from the book. Her younger brother stared back.

"It's a poem Pete."

"It doesn't rhyme though."

Claire laughed a little, and painfully adjusted her position in bed.

"Not all poems have to rhyme Pete. This one doesn't. It's by a very obscure writer by the name of P.A. Ignatius. Have you heard of him?"

Peter shook his head.

"Well, most of his poems don't rhyme. But they are still nice, huh?"

Peter wasn't old enough to see the poem in front of him. Only within his sight could he grasp massive words, individual trunks sprung up in front of him. At only twelve, the lush forest beyond evaded him. Twelve's wasn't too young though.

"Oh, okay, I get it."

Claire managed a smile again, then continued reading out loud.

"When the intrepid sleeper looks out in the dim hours before dawn, his eyes may stumble across the first rose. He may try to bring it home, carefully clasping soft petals of a silk finer than water. The thorns, though, are still sharp, and below each leaf of the first rose, the growl of youth stirs and shivers ever so slightly.

"So if you awake to find the first rose of the day, think not of tearing it loose. Watch it explode into the dew. Watch bees dance and buzz about all day. Step out and smell its fragrance, and, if you dare, touch it gently, just enough so its blushed silk trembles in your hand.

"And, when night falls, watch the first rose slip into its weepy slumber. Mourn its faded glory and cry for its worn and wilted body. But do not feel sorry for it; though it is gone, its sweet breath still lingers in the air. Its blush still burns in your mind, and you will remember that the first rose lived and was not forgotten."

A nurse came and announced that visiting hours were over. Pete hid a yawn while the nurse tucked Claire in tight against the chilly night. She reached inside her blanket for the book.

"Here Pete, I want you to read this. Hang on to it for me ok?"

"Sure. I'll bring it back when I'm done."

"Yeah, okay," Claire whispered into her pillow. She smiled then, and a faint and pink warmth stirred on the edge of a grayed cheek.

The nurse led Pete away and outside, into a darkened corridor filled with the echoes of fading footsteps.

Claire died three days later. Her book lay forgotten under Pete's bed. It did not soak any tears, and its dark bindings held through the torrent of dust that was swept by it. It decayed in peace until one day, Pete's mother asked him if he wanted to say something at his sister's funeral. For days he was lost, his mind wandering that vast and fast crumbling forest of mere words, until one day he crawled on the floor, and under his bed found his sister's grove still sleeping.

When the time came, Pete was there. He stood, and fell. He sat, and rose, and ran, and vomited. Eventually those fears passed, and on a terribly cold and dry November day, he got up in front of all those people who knew Claire.

"My sister wa-was-"

He blinked and kicked at the frost hardened grass, already yellow and dead. People waited.

"People say that-uh-th-"

He trembled a bit, his face scrunching up as he thought. For a moment, he was lost again. Then he saw those words floating and he picked them out, finding those that didn't rhyme, but felt right for him.

"I-I...I remember my first rose," he began. Before his eyes he saw a forest of roses bloom and grow.

Dublin Nights

Here now, gone now, cast away,
Homes too cold to starve,
Mark a fall of grace anew,
No heart loaves left to carve.

Powdered hope that's neatly sealed,
Packed for long lost noon,
Little children waiting last,
With promises of soon.

Into Dublin's smoky dawn,
Grinding mills of you,
Smoking chairs and leather twists,
Coal stones and skies not blue.

Waiting for the last dream-train,
Walking streets that crumble,
Pretty girls and stolen kisses,
Empty hearts that rumble.

O! Alone, alone again,
Puppet's masquerade,
Shameful strings on willing hands,
With nothing left to trade.

Grieve some sunken rolling hill,
Beg your given role,
Opus sung to creeping walls,
To lose the poor you stole.

Why has midnight slipped away?
Moonlight skewered nights?
Waning fences set you free,
Too wrong to make your rights.

New Perspectives



The Forgotten Tomorrow

Elliot had dreams about everything. It was an obsession, kind of like an addiction except not quite. Of course, dreams weren't close to reality. Elliot much preferred those vivid dreams, especially those waking dreams where he felt he had control for the only time in his life, where the world was narrowed down onto a console where he had sole control. Those five-minute god sessions may have felt good, but Elliot's mother grew more and more concerned that her boy was slowly and inevitably spiraling out of life and into a permanent dream state.

After the accident the concern was very real, especially for Maggie, who had known Elliot for ten years, and had shared his secrets and some of his most profound dreams. But when Elliot woke up that day from the hospital that old Elliot was gone and in his

place was just a dream where he had lost control and worse, couldn't wake up.

Maggie knew Elliot since they were seven, playing together in the old peaceful neighborhood lots and playgrounds where the gentle breeze and picture perfect grass sprouted no need for dreams of a better life. In those days, before active conscious emotions arise, there is nothing more complex about the brain than survival and happiness, and for Elliot those two needs were satisfied as in every child who lives the American dream, or at least the version sold for less in stores everywhere. Those were the times where the fields of play were more and more beautiful until neither of them could separate those images with the graceful notion of heaven so zealously presented by serious men and women who warned that doing bad things would take away that heaven.

It didn't come as a surprise, then, when that heaven disappeared and was replaced as time grew by a conflicted, tortured inner self. That joyful boy didn't have those simple needs anymore; no those were gone forever. There were other needs now, intellectual, spiritual, emotional that sometimes are crushed out of the young man by the world which simply grinds down the good and evil without judgement. That world ground Elliot up and spit him out, like a wounded and confused beast back onto his fields of heavens, which were no longer quite so joyful or green. Maggie took the transition a little easier, expressing herself as most people do; she was like a cold rose that opens to the new spring air. Elliot though, simply drew in the frost and became colder and colder until even Maggie couldn't find away through his wall of silence.

The dreams then, became more and more important for the kid who wasn't able to draw enough sustenance from the real world, and had to rely more and more on the fantasies and dreams that were too fragile to support the world, never mind a human consciousness. Then, though Maggie cried and tried to act sad, as Elliot's mother or Alexi did, she never was able to be completely truthful. Because, after the accident, Elliot seemed to be seven again, only hoping to happy and live, but life is a wheel, and it came around once more to crush an Elliot without walls or barriers.

The day before the accident Elliot had a progressively rare talk with Maggie. These talks never occurred anymore, except when Elliot's thin wall crumbled for a few moments to let Maggie try to cure her friend. Elliot was wondering about the future then, a future he felt was devoid for him. He had no ambition beyond dreaming, and no dreams beyond less reality.

"What am I going to do? I'm not good at anything."

"Sure you are," Maggie reassured, "you're good at lots of stuff."

"Like what?"

"Lots of stuff. You just don't know it yet."

"I'm not going to have a future."

"Don't say that. Think positive and you'll have a wonderful future."

Of course, she couldn't say that last line quite as soundly as the rest, since she was successful and popular and rich. Elliot had nothing, his family barely had anything now, and there was no worse compound for a lost soul than a body lost amid a field of gray and struggle that was Elliot's daily life.

"You can say that. You've got everything ahead."

"Don't worry Elliot. Everything thing'll be cheerio someday."

Maggie said that to Elliot a lot. As they talked by the creek, little animals and birds came by and watched the mini-drama unfold. None of them had anything more to worry about than food in their stomachs though.

"Maybe you should, maybe, stop sleeping so much?"

Maggie ventured carefully. She ventured into a wall of silence.

"Hey, come on. I'm trying to be worried here."

"You're trying, that's commendable. How many times have you used that line today?"

"Elliot that's not funny."

"You're my friend, mother, and politician all in one."

"Elliot."

"Are you even my friend anymore or just a face that comes by once in a while to make sure the vote is still there?"

"Elliot!"

And that's how most mornings went, with a piercing cry like the one the morning after his talk with Maggie. Those cries would snap him out of some beautiful daze, and he would return again and again until his mother literally threw him out of bed to get him to stop dreaming. He dreamt when he napped or slept in class. He dreamt when he didn't mean to and when he did. He dreamed too much.

"You're not just a vote! Damn it Elliot, I'm worried about you, you dream too much!"

"You have dreams too."

"Not like that. I don't try to. There is a real world Elliot, please, please come back to it."

"You act like I'm some lost puppy. You should join the drama club, you're really good at that."

"Damn it Elliot! Are you going to push me away too?"

"Who's pushing who?"

Maggie felt like knocking over his jeering face.

"Stop dreaming. Anything is better than your dreams, your great fantasies of pretty girls and you a hero in shining armor. Even your freaking past is better than that!"

She regretted the words instantly, wishing beyond hope that she could inhale those words. The past had not treated Elliot too kindly.

"The past has not been kind to some people."

Elliot's father had died years ago of cancer. His mother had been heartbroken, their lives wrecked.

"I'm sorry Elliot. I didn't mean it, I just said it."

"It's ok Maggie. I'm sorry too."

And just like that he got up from their rock by the creek and walked away. Every time he did that Maggie expected him to just jump in the creek, or at the very least she expected to see his obituary, "Boy commits suicide" the next day. She prayed sometimes, the only times she prayed anymore, a God she could turn on to keep Elliot alive.

"Look, Elliot, I'll see you tomorrow right? After school? Don't forget! Elliot?"

She yelled at his retreating form uselessly as he waved without looking.

"Tomorrow."

And that next day after school when he hadn't showed up that disposable God she had been using stopped working, and she got a phone call saying that Elliot had been in a terrible accident. She cried out his name loudly and cursed at herself, thinking that she should have bound and gagged him on the spot.

"**Elliot!** I swear if you do not get up I'm going to bound and gag you to the car and drive you to school comatose."

Elliot slowly awoke, letting the shabby image of reality come to focus on his weary eyes. He was developing chronic insomnia, almost self afflicted, trying to dream or remember good dreams, anything to displace the terrible past in which his father would die, his mother be broken and everything he knew and loved shattered before he could know and love them. Outside, Aaron honked the horn.

"Elliot! Get your ass out here we're late!"

The dream that was life was a sick cross between a comedy and a drama that couldn't make up its mind until everything was blurred and muddled in the fading shadows of morning.

"I swear Elliot! If you don't-"

"**If I don't what?**"

"Please Elliot. Just talk to Doctor Monroe."

"Why? So he can jack me up on pills. I'll pass."

"I'm trying to help you," Elliot's mother said.

"No you're not. You're trying to take away the only thing I have. You don't know what it's like to lost the only thing you have!"

But then Elliot wanted to suck those immature words back in from his mouth. His mother took a step back aghast, eyes bulging out and for the first time in a long time he wanted to hold her and tell her he didn't mean it. Elliot's father had been everything for his mother, and he had just made the worse statement he could think of. **If only** one could pull words back from the air, Maggie thought as Elliot walked away from their spot by the creek, and later as she crumple under the weight of the news of the accident. **If only** she could pull those words back maybe for some reason he'd be okay right now, strolling into the room to help her with her schoolwork. And **if only** Elliot could take back those words he had just spoken

four years ago to his mother, maybe she would not have looked at him with those terrifying eyes, so horrible that Elliot would have given his own life to pull those words back.

As Elliot lay unconscious on the hospital bed, his mother and Alexi hovered aimlessly like sad pups waiting for their dead mothers to awake. Alexi had been there for the accident and came out only with a broken arm, which was already set. Aaron was alive too, just a few bruises and scratches. But Elliot lay on the hospital bed and did not stir or wake. Elliot's mother cried sometimes, knowing that maybe Elliot had found one dream he could really live in forever, and had chosen to do so.

The dreams stopped after Elliot awoke on one crisp morning. After that no matter how much he slept he could not dream, whether it be a rousing nap or a deep slumber. That made all of Elliot's friends, and his mother, feel better, even after they realized that Elliot's mind had been wiped clean, his entire past destroyed, his brain returned to that seven year old state that Maggie loved and his mother longed for. There was something different, though. His past wasn't simply gone, it was altered, filled with something that was not his to have or hold.

"Are you sure you don't need anything? Everything is alright?"

"Yes Maggie I'm fine, really."

"Are you sure? You look a little pale. Maybe you should eat a little something."

Elliot suddenly reached out from under his hospital blanket and touched Maggie's fretting hand. He touched it impulsively and held it for a while. In the dark room, he could see Maggie's face turn red.

"I'm alright Maggie."

She paused, still holding his hand. She felt a little better.

"Elliot, do you remember anything? Do you remember what we talked about by the creek?"

Elliot's eyes closed and he strained to remember.

"Maybe? I don't know everything's kind of blurry."

"I said something I shouldn't of, and I just wanted to say I'm sorry."

"I'm sure you didn't mean it. Thank you for apologizing."

"Oh Elliot, if there's anything I can do. I mean, the hospital stay must be expensive and I'm sure my family can help-"

"Help? What are you talking about Maggie? Don't you remember? We're well off."

Maggie looked confused.

"Remember? Uncle Benny won the lottery, we can afford this."

"When was this?"

"I don't know. A while ago?"

Maggie was concerned about the charming smile on Elliot's face. Suddenly the door burst open and Elliot's mother charged in past a broken line of doctors.

"Oh Elliot! You're alright! You're alright!"

"Yeah Mom, I'm okay, really."

She clung to him and did not let go. The doctors had told her that Elliot remembered nothing, but he had just called her mom.

"You know who I am Elliot? It's me Elliot."

"Yeah Mom, jeez get off you're going to strangle me!"

She backed off, only smiling. The doctors came in to talk to Elliot as Maggie pulled his mother outside.

"Maggie thank you for staying here with Elliot. I'm sure he felt better with you here."

"Yeah. If there's anything we can do for him, I mean the hospital's not a great place, and-" Maggie paused, not sure.

"And it can be quite expensive, and I'm just saying if you guys need any help we can-"

"No, no Maggie! That just the thing. I just got off the phone with my brother, from Denver. Can you believe, he won the lottery. More than a million dollars. Can you believe that!"

Maggie turned pale.

"When, when did this happen?"

"I called him just a few minutes ago. He found out just today."

"That doesn't make sense."

"What?"

"Elliot. He just told me that. He said his Uncle Benny had won the lottery."

"What? How did he know? Maybe he heard it on TV while he was out this morning, or on the radio."

"No, he didn't say he heard it today. He said it as if it had happened years ago, as if he remembered it happening."

"That's impossible!"

The doctors pushed back Aaron.

"But he's my friend! I have to see him!"

"That's impossible, he's in surgery he-"

"No damn it let me in!"

The doctors pushed back Aaron again, pushing him into the main lobby. He cursed at himself, blaming himself. Alexi pulled him aside.

"It's alright Aaron. He'll be alright."

Aaron looked up and kissed Alexi briefly, carefully not touching her injured arm.

"Yeah I'm sure he'll be ok."

Aaron and Alexi were the inseparable couple that every school has, and always stick together past school into marriage into that idea dream-life that everyone wishes for. Aaron knew Elliot for a long time, and Alexi was a friend Maggie's. With Elliot and Maggie's help, they got together, and after only a month or so, Aaron had his future planned.

"It'll be great Elliot, we're going to go to school together, just a few towns over at the University, and then we'll get married. You wait and see."

"I'll be invited to the wedding right?"

"Invited? You're going to be my best man Elliot. And Maggie's going to come too. You know, you two are so close, maybe you should-"

Elliot sighed as Aaron gave his wicked smile and poked Elliot in the ribs.

"You know Aaron, you're right. So, where are you going for your honeymoon. Obviously me and Maggie gotta come along!"

Aaron's eyes bulged as Elliot fell out of his lawn chair, his laugh crackling in and out of the fireworks smashing in the night sky behind him. Alexi and Maggie appeared.

"What's so funny?"

"I knew it," Alexi said, "Elliot's finally lost it."

"Come here honey," Elliot said mockingly, holding Maggie to him, "when we get married we're going to join Aaron and Alexi on their honeymoon. Right?"

Maggie smiled as Alexi and Aaron both blushed, shooting their worst looks. She took up the act.

"Oh yes dear, we'll be right next door in case anything happens."

Elliot laughed, and Maggie laughed, and they fell together onto the grass still holding each other unable to stop laughing. They tumbled and for that one moment their façade of friendship slipped away in the shimmering night sky where the fireworks glittered like their eyes.

Aaron saw it. He knew it. He knew it from the beginning that Elliot and Maggie were more than just best friends. He just couldn't figure out why they hadn't expressed those feelings. Neither could Alexi, but they drew enough happiness from each other to occasionally forget the other two members of their group.

"Ignore them Alexi. They're just nuts that's all."

"I know, they're insane."

"We'll show them."

But they never did, and even as Alexi came in afterwards to talk to Elliot, she still had no proof of anything of substance until Elliot shattered her dream with those memories he remembered from God knows where.

"Are you alright Alexi?" he asked from the hospital bed.

"Yeah. Arm hurts a little, but it's not so bad. What about you? Are you-are you feeling better?"

"I'm okay. Everything okay at home?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Well I don't know, I just thought with the bad arm you might have trouble taking care of the baby and all."

Her eye's flashed for a moment as she closed in on Elliot, grasping his hand madly.

"What did you say?"

"I just said with the bad arm-"

"After that, about the baby?"

"Your baby? You didn't lose your memories either did you?"

Your baby-"

"Elliot. I don't have a baby."

"Sure you do. I don't remember her name, in fact I barely remember anything about her but you had one I'm sure about that."

"Elliot I'm in high school."

"What are you talking about? Have you gone nuts?"

"Elliot!"

"You have a baby! I remember that. Don't tell me I'm remembering wrong!"

"Elliot! Pay attention. I'm pregnant, but no one knows. I've told no one, not my parents or Maggie. How do you know that?"

"What do you mean? Doesn't everybody know?"

"No! Nobody knows. How do you know?"

"I just remember it happening that's all."

"Who am I?"

"Alexi. You're Maggie's friend. I didn't remember your name, but I recognize your face. You were a mother."

"Don't say that!"

Aaron stepped back another step as Alexi came forward.

"I don't care what you say just don't say that!"

Alexi's eyes charged at him from the dim light in his backyard, after he had come home, and after Alexi had talked for a while with Elliot.

"How could you do this to me?"

"Look baby I-"

"Don't say that!"

"I'm sorry I-"

"I told you not to say that!"

"I was being stupid, that's all."

"I'm leaving!"

"But it's true," Elliot said as Alexi charged out the door of his hospital room.

"It's not true."

"Ask Aaron. I'm sorry Alexi, but I thought you remembered."

"I can't remember Elliot! All these things are happening, but only you remember! We don't even know about these damn things yet but you remember them like they were yesterday! I wish you could slip back into your little coma and dreams and leave the rest of us alone!"

And just then she wished she could pull those words back, for she didn't know what dream Elliot had when he was in the coma. Elliot looked up with a bitter look.

"I'm sorry."

Alexi ran from the backyard.

"I'm sorry!"

Maggie was sorry too the next day when she had ignored Elliot, and watched the news as two armed gunmen shot their way through a bank, killing at least six people, just as Elliot had remembered. She ran back to Elliot later that day.

"How did you know that was going to happen?"

"What?"

"The bank robbery?"

"What bank robbery? I don't remember that."

And so that was it. Elliot could not remember the past, only the future, and even worse, his dreams were non-existent. His mother was torn between thinking her son was better or worse off not remembering the past, not seeing the future. He was blind in too many ways now, but ignorance was bliss in that era of dreams.

Maggie ran to Elliot during that week he was in the hospital, between the swarms of doctors come to check his brain patterns and waves and signals. And she learned what he remembered and set out to do what was right, but every time she tried, like stopping Lane from breaking that freshmen's arm, or to stop her own parents from divorcing, she found out that Elliot was wrong. Then she would run back and learn that Elliot did not remember such incident, until finally she stopped trying.

"What do you remember?"

"I remember waking up."

"Before then."

"We were happy when we were little, weren't we? I remember that. We were happy."

"Yeah," Maggie sighed, "we were happy."

"**We were**," Aaron said in a deep voice. He peered across the dinner table at Alexi.

"We were all happy once."

He didn't dare speak a word of the grave offense he had already committed to the earth. Digging up the dead would do no good.

"It's getting hot in here. I'm going out to the backyard," Aaron said, getting up and padding softly away.

Elliot didn't tell anyone what he dreamed of. The doctors kept saying that his brain activity was not normal during REM sleep, but they didn't know the truth of it all. Maggie asked finally one day if Elliot was or was not dreaming, and he couldn't simply look her in the eyes and lie straight out. So he told her he didn't remember, which he didn't really. But the day he awoke, he awoke from that terrible dream with so many terrible memories.

"Oh God!"

"Elliot! You're awake?"

"Maa--maaa--"

"Yes, yes it's Maggie, hang on I'll get a doctor."

"No, Maggie, don't."

"Don't? But you're not okay. You were badly hurt. You were--"

"Oh Maggie I'm sorry."

"About what? Never mind I'm sure it's alright."

"You didn't have to jump."

"Jump?"

"Don't die Maggie."

"I'm fine Elliot. But you need help, hang on I'll--"

"Please don't die, I think I love you."

"Shh, Elliot, you're not well."

"Please don't go Maggie. The waters are too deep!" He reached out and grabbed her hand, and tugged as if

trying to save her from the brisk rivers of his lingering memories. Then his day-dream ended and his grip on her hand relaxed.

"Elliot?"

"I had a terrible dream Maggie. I don't remember it, but it was terrible."

"It's alright. I'll get a doctor."

"**No!**"

Aaron swerved in the middle of the yellow light to avoid an oncoming car making a left turn. Alexi yelled briefly and in the back seat Elliot grabbed hold of the door. There was the horribly high-pitched scream of the brakes as the car made a full turn. There was a huge crunch and the roar of thunder followed by the shrieking car pulling itself apart. There was the crystalline sound of glass shattering and metal compacting, and suddenly their car was rolling, over and over again. Alexi screamed again and Elliot tried to hold on but was thrown over and over until he thought he would die. Finally the car slammed hard into a pole and Elliot, with only a lap belt, slammed forward into the back of the front seat and then to the side where the small car had hit the pole. He was knocked out instantly as fragments of glass from his window hit him and the car died all around him. Aaron was trying to move, to get out and help the others but he was trapped, and Alexi was weeping softly in the darkness and coughing slightly as a slight haze of dust settled inside the car. She couldn't move her arm, and it was dark and cramped, and everything hurt at once, and she kept crying.

"Elliot?"

Aaron swore and tried to reach Elliot, who was bleeding from the temple and not moving.

"Oh God!"

"Alexi, can you get out?"

"My arm. Oh my arm."

"Elliot's hurt real bad."

"Oh my arm!"

"Elliot's hurt real bad!"

Aaron struggled out of the car, and reached the other side. A small crowd was starting to form around.

"Call 911! Someone call 911 for God's sake!"

He himself was bleeding, but not so badly as Elliot. The car was turned over, and as he crawled around to the other side, he let Alexi out. She rolled over and spilled onto the street, landing hard on her bad arm.

"Shit! Oh God!"

Aaron moved past her, and to the back. He struggled with the door, which wouldn't move until he kicked it real hard, and then pulled it open. He struggled with Elliot. Inside the car was impossible dark, and Elliot was turned over, his own seatbelt impaling him. Aaron didn't know what to do. What if he was really badly hurt? Should he move him? He reached around to undo the lap belt, and as he did that Elliot slid forward into his arms. His neck turned slightly and revealing the other side, where a piece of glass the size of a torn dollar bill was sticking out of his head slightly to the right and behind his forehead.

"Oh shit! Jesus! Elliot!"

Aaron crawled out, and stumbled back, cutting his palms on broken glass as he came out. Elliot didn't move.

"Oh shit! Oh God! Shit shit shit!"

Alexi moaned on the street behind him.

"My arm, my arm."

Suddenly Elliot began sliding out of the car, and Aaron crawled forward and caught him in his own bloodied hands which burned like crazy. A thick stream of blood poured from Elliot's head down the side of his neck, making a large dark red stain in his shirt. Aaron thought that Elliot was losing way too much blood; that he should stop the bleeding somehow, but he was paralyzed by fear. He turned back to the side, still holding Elliot, and moved his head out of the way so he wouldn't vomit directly onto Elliot. On the street, his blood and Elliot's was mixing with glass and pieces of plastic and metal in a slimy dark red soup that made everything slippery as Aaron fumbled around for something to grab onto.

"Help him!" he yelled as he held Elliot's bleeding form.

"Somebody help!"

He sat on his knees for a long time, holding Elliot, not wanting to move the glass or stop the bleeding, simply holding him watching him die and waiting for help.

"I thought you were going to die Elliot."

Elliot looked up at Maggie.

"I just had a bad dream.

"Why did you say those weird things to me when you first awoke? That I jumped?"

"I had this memory, of you...but it's gone now."

"Something bad?"

"Yes, but it's gone now. I don't want anything bad to happen to you, especially since you've taken care of me all this time."

"I can't take all the credit."

Elliot motioned for her to lean closer, and he gently kissed her cheek.

"Thanks."

She blushed and took his hand.

"Hey, we'll be okay. I promise, someday we'll be as happy as we were."

"Some day. I won't dream about that I promise. It'll happen and when we're old and like this we'll just remember those happy times, not times like these."

"Promise?"

Elliot smiled and nodded, and she bent down to kiss him on the forehead.

"Ow."

She laughed a little and moved away from the light around his bed. Elliot frowned a little and wanted to grab her hand and pull her back into the light, but she was already drifting away into the shadows.

"Don't go Maggie," he whispered softly to no one.

Fishing by the creek was more relaxing afterwards for Elliot. After the accident everything was better, more subdued, less frantic and cold. Even the cool water and springtime shade of the forest near the creek felt better on his cold cheek. Aaron came by sometimes, not to fish but to simply sit around and watch, and talk to his old friend. Maggie almost always was with Elliot now, like a second shadow that wouldn't leave his side. Aaron couldn't blame her; she was one of those people who liked to be in control, and this time she wouldn't let anything happen to Elliot. She felt, if she was

there, then nothing bad could ever go wrong. Those damn dreams though, she could never control them. And they were never good anymore. They were always of little glimpses of Elliot's past, like staying by his father's deathbed or moving away from his old home next door to Maggie's.

"Mommy! Maggie fell."

"Where? Where honey?"

"Into the pool, Maggie fell into the pool!"

They rushed out, Elliot's mother grasping his chubby little hands and moving outside by the public pool. A lifeguard was swimming towards Maggie.

"Mommy! Maggie's hurt. She jumped in and fell and-"

"It's ok. She's alright, see, the lifeguard has her. She'll be alright just you wait."

She was fine, and afterwards Elliot's two-way mind only knew that she was alive and happy.

"You almost drowned."

"It was ok. I'm all better."

"Good," Aaron said, "I'm glad one of us is better."

Maggie and Elliot looked up from their posts by the large, rushing creek with its dark impenetrable waters where thin lines emerged.

"One of us? Everything okay Aaron?"

"No! That's just the thing. I'm glad you're alright Elliot, but damn it did you have to talk to Alexi."

"I thought she knew."

"No one knew. Only I knew. How could you know?"

"I thought it happened, though I don't know now."

"Even if you randomly guessed, you got it right, and my life is ruined. Alexi left me. I'm ruined Elliot, because of your dreams."

"It wasn't a dream. I thought it was real," Elliot maintained quietly.

"Damn it. I had everything."

"I'm sorry Aaron."

"Are you, you bastard?"

"Aaron, come on," Maggie said.

"Really. Why couldn't you just die or something. Anything but come back and ruin everybody's life."

"Who's life have I ruined?"

"Mine. And just look around. For the past couple of weeks everybody's been running around for you. Just look at Maggie."

Maggie looked exhausted, with two rings under her face and her hair a little messed up. She looked down at the ground. Aaron got up from a rock and faced Elliot, who turned around a bit from his position fishing.

"Why couldn't you go back to your dreams?"

"Aaron if Alexi means that much to you, we can talk to her and-"

"And what? Why did you ever have to wake up and remember!"

"Remember."

"Remember what Mom?"

Elliot's mother looked down and wondered whether her son was too young to understand.

"Some things in life are hard to remember, others are hard to forget. But there are some moments in time you wish you could have back, so never forget those moments."

"I won't."

Aaron pushed Elliot into the creek, which rolled deeply carrying Elliot away.

"Aaron!"

Aaron backed away.

"I-I didn't mean to push him that hard."

"Elliot!"

"Maggie, help! I can't get out! Maggie help!"

Maggie jumped into the river.

"I didn't mean to," Aaron whispered.

"Elliot hang on!"

The river emptied out onto the ocean, and Elliot swirled out ever faster into the waters.

"Help me Maggie, I don't want to drown."

"You won't, I'm coming!"

"Maggie, I love you I don't want to die," Elliot yelled. The sun was fading onto the horizon and he was but a shadow.

"I love you too Elliot. God I love you! I won't let you die," she yelled back. She swam harder against the raging currents.

"Don't forget me Maggie."

"Elliot, hang on I'm almost there!"

She could almost reach his hand.

"Maggie!"

"Elliot!"

"Maggie!"

Maggie awoke in her bed, the sheets tossed around her. She was yelling into a pillow when her mother opened the door. She stood in the doorway looking at her disheveled daughter, struggling to free herself of her latest fantasy.

"Oh Mom! I had the greatest dream."

"Don't say that."

"It was wonderful. I'll have it again, it'll be more wonderful!"

"Oh Jesus Maggie, what's happened to you. This isn't right."

"But Mom! Elliot was in it, and he loved me, and I loved him back of course."

"Oh Maggie, don't say that."

"And he was drowning. But I was swimming after him. I was going to save him. I could save him because I love him!"

In the doorway, Maggie's mother hugged the frame of the door and shivered. She turned her head away.

"Mom?"

Maggie's mother left her daughter to her dreams and memories, moving out of the doorway, hearing the echo of the word mom come from the room. She quietly closed the door and turned into the hallway, pausing for just a moment in tragic yearning for those happier times. And then that too was past, and she silently swept away into the hallway where a picture was all that was left of her husband, and even more silently she crept into the hollow living room where only echoes and fragments glowed lingeringly like embers in the emptiness.

My Minotaur

The word *civil echoes* oddly for me. Off one side comes the *echo* of civility, that side of behavior which is social, refined, mannerly, and **humane**. The other *echo* returns something else altogether, some brutal and terrible. Reverend King told us why we couldn't wait, and from there we sprung up into the actions and whirlwind of the Movement.

Truthfully I had no idea what I was doing. None of us did really. Certainly not a sense of anything: courage, pride, right, wrong, morality, religion, ethos. Those were certainly not terms that I snuggled with or that comforted me during long cold nights sleeping on concrete with no hopes to pillow me. There was no sign of the times I knew, saw, or recognized. We fought for illusion. I had never seen the face of evil that I fought with no guns. It was there, and I understood it later, maybe as I lay dying on the street, puddles of

blood and water around me, my ribs aching, broken, shattered. Those were pieces of a larger truth, a vision I was given parts of. All before a time where "prejudice" was not being able to play dominoes outside with white people. It was against the law, after all, and we must always obey the law...

Those were the times, the last times we saw with blinded eyes. Times which meant nothing when your friend came home with a new name for you. And that name echoed in your head and became you. The voice of ignorance pounds in your brain. It feeds upon you, consuming your frail existence until you are no longer what you are but rather what **they** want you to be.

Then that **Creature** within you awakens. That **Minotaur** which you have kept hidden with nothing less than your own civility. The **Beast** is only defending you after all, though what's left to defend is not much more than a cold shell of rage seething against its own cages. That's when you feel **It** inside. Stop what you're doing and turn off any sounds, radio, television, voices.

See if you can hear the **Minotaur** growling from its Labyrinth of your soul, **Its roar** echoing up from the depth of your heart.

Hear **it** pounding inside you, with ever pulse of blood carries an *echo* of the smashing hammer-blows on its anvil: the heart.

However tiny that *echo* is, **it** is still beats with the life of a shard of blinding rage. **Listen.**

Do you hear **It** within you?

Ask **it** what **it** can make you do.
Murder? Rape? Bigotry? Or worse.

I thought about these things in jail. Such a place is not meant to hold the wailing spirit of one little black girl. It would be hard to imagine. Find a closet. Go inside. Close the door. Give yourself some bread and water. No heat. Sit.

Stand
If The
re is N
o room
For sit
ting.

Tremble if it is cold

S t a r v e if you h u n g e r

It is quiet, but not calm, for you can hear the **Minotaur** *beating* within you, and you want to emulate it and beat on the walls or walls.

Try it. Do so.

Your mother or father may come running, or maybe a sibling or friend. But in this jail, no one comes running.

Because. You are dead.

You are worse
than dead.
Your living
corpse
is not rotting
in a room the
size of your
closet.
You are far
worse, for
Your memory
is rotting
Away
in that
foul coffin

of a mind
and

you

are

I stepped into the diner to a **wave** of silence. It is not just that, I realized, but a **cold** wall of eyes. **White** eyes peering from **White** sockets. I sat down at the counter.

"Whatcha doin here girl?" a sunny haired waitress said. "This ain't a place for you girl. Best be moving on."

I **splashed** a nickel onto the counter, and it rang. Behind me, the diner door chimed open as a few more people from the Movement came in.

"I would like a slice of apple pie."

The waitress stepped back under the **weight** of color. A cook from the back stepped forward.

"Now ya'll don't want no trouble. It is a **White** only diner."

Silence.

"Dy'll hear? We don't serve negroes in here!"

Silence.

And then the **roar** was unleashed. The whites everywhere, good citizens, wives, and husbands surged forth to grab us by our collective collars and push us out. They

T

H

R

E

W

...us out.

So we walked away. In a group. Within the group the **monster** murmured. **They** heard that murmur. They came. The truck pulled up.

"Now kids," a burly officer began, "you know there is a city ordnance against group civil rights protests by-"

"We ain't protesting. We just walking. Can't we walk?"

"I'm afraid you've become a danger to the city's-"

"We can't walk? I sure as hell won't **crawl** for you mister."

"For the last time, disband and return to your homes immediately."

forgotten.

We stood, like statues *burbling* within. Some officers jumped out and began pushing us aside. I jumped up and grabbed an officer. Then the snakes attacked.

They slithered from their truck, wet and slippery with past pain. They spit forth an awful jet of 1—0—0—m—p—h— water which struck me in the chest, instantly depriving me of air. It knocked ME CLEAR OFF MY FEET

It crunched my ribs, and even the roar growing within me was silenced by an ever mounting wrath of water and pain. I fell, pushed to the ground, shrieking. Several older people walked towards me to help me up, but then the snake lashed out with an awesome force and struck them too. One was

thrown balance
off

The other was smashed into a post where his arm b r o k e and s h a t t e r e d

I tried getting up, but the stream of water pushed me down, kept me down, a thousand bricks of hydrogen and oxygen pressed against my body, holding me down, smothering me in searing pain. My eyes burned, my body ached, and we were beaten against the wall by the snake's venom over and over and over and over until none of us could move. My skin was burned raw, and from one corner, one boy was trying to get up, slipping over and over in the puddle of venom and his own blood. No one cried, and whether it was the numbing rush of water or my own choosing, I could hear nothing but the roar within. My Minotaur awoke. It was hungry.

By the time the Minotaur was full, I was hungry. My body craved under the pressure of the snake once more. It was cracked, ground up, milled, smushed, destroyed, hurt in only the way mothers feel of their children seeing them scraped and battered, running in to sweep up their children in their arms if only to reverse the cracking, grinding, milling, smushing, destroying, and hurting. By the time my Minotaur was full, I

.stood for
gotten in
jail thrice
more

and still I was blind, following Monster on its triumphant
CRUSADE

From The Pits Of Hell and back here again

Only later, years, decades later did I see. Oh did I see the true ravages of civility in the human race. I no longer felt forgotten, and my Minotaur |||caged||| in its own sloth, rotted away until the fierce pounding in my heart was only a murmur once more. As I recalled my times as a knight of justice, thus blind, I began to actually see those vague virtues I bought, no we bought, with our pain. Reverend King's dream dawned upon most of us far after it was won, far after he paid his price. Those little bits of vision floated together to form, finally, a notion of heaven on this earth, which, all along my Minotaur had ached for.

The Seasons

I am your dying autumn;
Leaves melting in snow
Prayers sunken solemn
With blizzards of slow.

I am your ailing winter;
Palms open wide in love
Receiving the spun from
Drifting silkworms above.

I am your sickly spring;
Thawing on a street
Blooming vases running dry
Where colored lilies meet.

I am your last summer;
When fireflies make their mark.
Streaks of velvet run across
Milk splattered in the dark.

I am your dying autumn;
Still yearning yesterday
Still waiting on today
Still melting in snow.

Leyenda del Sol

"So there's this legend-

Adrian looked up, his face stuffed with cookies, his eyes quivering in their sockets. Heather didn't blink.

"Heather, you're not listening!"

"Yes I am," she said, not looking up.

Adrian pouted, and continued regardless.

"There's this legend, about the stars. The legend goes like this: every time someone dies, a star in the sky falls down, and that's what makes shooting stars."

"Uh huh," Heather mumbled.

"So here's what I want to know. The sun is a star, so what happens when that one person who is the sun dies? Will the sun fall down? I mean, isn't that bad? We'd all die!"

Adrian added sound effects to the death scene. Heather looked up.

"Not all legends are true."

"But it's a school assignment-

"I don't have time Adrian. Get dad to do it."

"He won't be back in time."

"I can't drive you around. Besides, how are you going to find this person, huh? People are going to think you're nuts."

Adrian looked hurt, and thumbed his phonebook thoughtfully.

"Well, I'm going to see if it's true first."

"It's a legend. It's not meant to be true," Heather said.

"There's this professor at the university who studies astronomy. He helped me buy my telescope. I bet he'd know."

"I know what he's going to say. He's going to tell you that it's just a legend, and that no one's death is going to make the sun disappear."

"Fine, but prove it. Drive me over there."

It didn't cut. It didn't cut.

Heather's voice pulsated in the cold.

"It didn't cut. It didn't cut," she whispered to the wind.

The razor didn't catch. It didn't cut. It didn't catch. It didn't cut. It wasn't easy. It didn't work. It didn't cut.

"It-

It didn't work. I didn't work. I didn't cut. I didn't make it cut. I couldn't make it catch. I couldn't cut. I didn't. I couldn't.

She slid out of the bathroom and out into the brisk, cold air. Adrian turned around. *He looks so young, she thought. Yet older now, more enlightened.*

Blood coursed through her head. She could hear each beat like some drum was locked in her ribcage. *Almost, but it didn't cut.*

"It's okay," she said breathlessly, approaching.

Adrian didn't look up.

"Not all legends are true."

The air around her was chilling, and very dry. She felt the razor in her jacket pocket, like some caged metal monster dying to emerge. Its roar was silent.

"I'll be right back, I'm going to use the bathroom," she told Adrian. She then shuffled to the public bathroom, which was empty, and moved slowly to a mirror, looking at herself.

She spoke, watching her image mouth the words and the echo it made, the way the syllables stacked and rumbled in the emptiness and cold.

She took out the razor, and felt it in her hands. It was light, thin, almost invisible, but the line it drew was permanent. *There's nothing left, then, she thought. I'm just going to quietly bleed away here, if that's alright with you, she mused.* She drew the razor across her outstretched wrist, and waited for its line.

The professor was in his office, behind a stack of books, staring at a sheet of numbers, his eyes masked in concentration. Adrian peeked through the door, and slowly opened it, staring at the professor for a while before softly knocking on the thick door.

The professor looked up.

"Yes?"

"Hi. It's me, Adrian, and this is my sister Heather."

Heather rolled her eyes impatiently.

"Yes?" he repeated.

"I had a question. Actually, it's about a legend. It says that every time someone dies, a star falls out of the sky and becomes a shooting star. So what happens if someone makes the sun fall?"

"Oh," the professor said, chuckling. "Well, first of all, shooting stars aren't stars. They are just little chunks of rock. Stars don't just fall. They take a long time to die."

Adrian looked fairly disappointed as he got in the car, and Heather gave him a slight look of pity.

"Hey, that just one guy right? Maybe he's wrong," he said hopefully.

"Yeah," she sighed.

"What do you think?"

"I don't know Adry, I don't know much about stars. Lots of people die though. Like Uncle Pat, remember?"

"Yeah, but there are a lot of stars. And stars can be born right?"

"Maybe, I don't know."

"Do you believe the legend?"

"It doesn't matter whether I do," she replied softly.

"Why not?"

"I'm not looking for the person who will make the sun fall. You are. So it only matters whether or not you believe in it."

"I don't know if I do."

"And what if you found the person who is linked with the sun? Would you believe then?" she asked. He didn't respond.

Adrian walked away from the man slowly, his feet crunching the gravel and raising a miniature storm.

Heather stared at his feet, sadly waltzing across the dirt. *That would be horrible, she thought. He had his hopes up; maybe I shouldn't have helped him. I should have discouraged him from the beginning. I wish someone had discouraged me in the beginning. No one told me it'd be like this.*

Adrian stopped, his back to the sun.

Nothing to live for anymore, Heather thought. Even Adrian can't get his legends to work. He can't justify that. What am I supposed to do? The razor blade whispered a silent response back.

Didn't they show educational movies about suicide? How it's not the answer? I'd like to know what the hell the answer is then, she whispered inside. Seventy-five years, she thought, is a long time. Without suicide, it's a long time to die.

The old man's eyes were embraced in wrinkles, making his eyebrow look like a cracked desert.

"I'm sorry young man, but that's just a legend. I don't even know whose legend it is. Not ours. And I don't think there is an answer. I don't think anyone could ever bear the weight of the entire sun. That's too much for one person."

"So it's not true?"

The man looked at Heather, looking for an answer, or an excuse to leave. She averted her eyes.

"I'm sorry, I just don't know. I don't think anyone knows. And maybe it's better that way. What if someone told you that you bore the weight of the sun, and that you could never die, because, if you did, the whole world would die too? It's probably better that they don't know. Whether or not it's real, it's your secret now."

The weight of not just the world, but also the sun; that seemed heavy to Heather.

Live now, a heavy life, a long march, an unforgiven Atlas?

Or. . . , she wondered. Sixty years is a long time to carry. . .

She patted her pocket, and felt the invisible weight of steel.

Hayley Whitaker was just getting up from her desk when she saw the two coming in. They looked at her intensely, and she knew that they were looking for her. She brushed back a lock of black hair, and darted her eyes away from the two and onto the cup of coffee in her hand. She sat down quietly, hoping they would go away. However, they were soon standing right in front of her desk.

"Ms. Whitaker?"

"Yes?" she asked tiredly.

"Were you the one that did the story on the eclipse a while ago?" Adrian asked.

Hayley remembered that eclipse. *That was one strange day*, she thought. The girl was staring at her like she was a ghost.

"Yes. I did the initial, but Robert over there did the follow-up."

"Well I'm doing a report on, uh, solar activity, and I was wondering if I could ask you some questions."

"I'm no expert on it, and I'm very busy right now, sorry."

She turned down to her work, leaving Heather and Adrian staring after the newswoman's dark, deep eyes.

The reporter honestly did feel sorry for the two, and wished there was some way she could help. But somehow, their little quest didn't seem very important to Hayley in the scheme of things.

The eclipse that had occurred had changed her life somewhat, thought the result hadn't been exactly what she had expected. She sighed, and put her pen down.

"Well what exactly can I help you with?" Hayley asked.

Humility had been bestowed upon her during that lightless noon. Hayley had seen how really small everyone was, like little ants under the magnifying glass, scurrying about. Not quite struggling in their cages because their cages were glass, and as far as they knew, they were free.

How incredible, she thought, *this glass cage*.

"Well," Adrian began, "It's about this legend."

"Legend, huh. Well, maybe I can help you," she sighed.

Only glass.

Heather squirmed in place. *What a mess*, she thought. *Nothing more than dirt, stands, cheap goods. Despair.*

Adrian was telling the man the legend.

Looking at the man, Heather could tell that he was not amused. The man looked like he felt truly sorry for Adrian.

Yet Adrian goes on like he believes. Like not only he believes, but that he would be able to force others to believe. Then again, he's young, and he can afford belief.

The man was asking questions about the details in the legend.

Heather looked at the cold pueblo, where the wind picked up everything without regard. She frowned at her world, her life, left to pieces and picking up shards. Left to following little boys on wondering wanderings, hopeless hopes with dying life.

How, she wondered, *could that man believe Adrian? He must have seen many things in his life, but never a twelve-year-old boy with an obscure legend.*

Well, maybe, she thought despairingly.

But not one that believes in it.

"Where can we find him?"

The man pointed to a building in the back, where an old man in a blue windbreaker was standing, talking to a few people.

"The one in the jacket?" Heather asked.

"Yeah, that's him."

She led Adrian down to the corner, past the stands selling corn. The smell of the burnt corn went around on the wind, filling Heather's mind with dim memories of steamed corn, mixed with the intoxicating scent of imitation brand incense, and the din of human voices. The stalls, hastily constructed, looked like they were alive, but old, dying, rotting.

Heather thought about Haley's eyes. Just like the reporter's eyes, but younger. *Strange, they look so alike, and have the same name. Except my best friend had beautiful eyes even after she was dead. They were so deep, like endless pools of dark chocolate, bitter with a little tinge of sweetness.* Heather breathed in the cold.

"Death is a hard thing."

Adrian stared at the priest.

"I don't mean death."

"What do you mean then?" the priest said, surprised.

"I mean, what happens to people when they die?"

"Well, the good book tells us that-

"I'm sorry father, but my brother doesn't need spiritual guidance, just help with a project," Heather interrupted.

Father Michael and Heather stared at each other.

"Excuse me?"

"Ms. Whitaker, from Channel 4, said you knew a lot about legends, and my brother is doing a project on legends."

"Oh," the priest said, scratching his nose.

Adrian told his legend.

The priest paused, thinking.

Heather and Adrian stared at him restlessly, their feet tapping on the church floor.

Columns of light buttressed the walls with graceful power.

They almost sang.

"I don't think it's Christian in origin. I can't see how it is, since there is no mention of any particular afterlife in Heaven, or," he coughed, "Hell. It's definitely not European, I would say."

There was no reply.

"Perhaps it's Native American. Sounds similar to several of their folk legends. Maybe you should ask someone out on the pueblo. They might know."

Heather stood up after an awkward silence.

"Thank you very much Father. We're sorry we wasted your time-

"Oh, no no. Always glad to help. And again, if you need any help, or if you are going through troubled times, you can always find open arms here."

Heather stared at him a moment, and opened her mouth to speak. "We'll remember that, Father," Adrian cut in. She closed her mouth and followed Adrian past the singing columns and outside.

She wanted to tell him not to ask. She wanted to tell him that death was one of those things you don't want to know about.

"Never mind," he said.

She cringed. She wished there were something she could do to comfort him. She wished there were something she could say. *But death, she thought, teaches its lessons firsthand I suppose.*

"I'm sorry Adrian. I don't think I can explain it."

"Yeah, it's okay. And-" he paused, frowning, "I'm sorry about your friend. I guess I never said that."

"Don't worry Adrian, that was a long time ago. It hurts less in time," she lied, almost cringing.

He stared. She patted his head.

"First thing tomorrow, we'll drive out to the pueblo and find the spiritual leader, or someone. Trust me, we'll ask around until we find someone who will know."

She left his room, closing the door. She walked to her parents' bedroom, which was empty. They wouldn't be back for another week. As Heather went looking through the medicine closet, she thought about Haley, dying, those eyes, dying. Gasping.

"People die all the time, don't they," Adrian asked.

Heather turned around, surprised.

"I suppose."

"So I could be too late."

"Too late for-", Heather began. She stopped herself short. *He knows. He knows now.* It clicked right there and then, the whole situation; she knew why he had this sudden obsession with not just any old story, but a legend about death.

He can feel his mortality. First, he felt his life, his wonderful, joyous, sunny, singing, playing, happy life. Now he realizes that every symphony ends. He understands that he is alive. He understands that he is living. And, he understands that he is dying.

Heather couldn't remember a time when she realized that she was on the downhill slope of life. *At least we're happy, Adrian.*

"Does death hurt?" he asked.

We're happy right now. Please don't ask. Please don't ask.

Adrian had the windows rolled down and a hand creeping towards the outside of the car. Heather kept a close eye on her brother's creeping hand, ready to pounce with a harsh word if it got too close to the outside.

The wind rolled into the car and out, whipping about with an organized, timed belch. It was like someone was pumping the air in very fast, and the sound was deafening as they moved down the streets.

With his hand shielding his eyes, Adrian looked at the passing people in other cars, trying to scrutinize their every detail. His eyes pored over every pedestrian along the street, looking. He was looking for anyone, someone, a person with a sign. He was searching for that person who would say, "Oh, yes, if I die the sun goes with it," or perhaps, "yes I know who makes the sun shoot out of the sky." Could it be that fellow walking down the street?

"Stop staring at people Adrian, you're making them nervous, and worst of all you're making me nervous."

"Sorry," he said. He didn't look over. A lady in yellow was walking past on her way to a bus stop, a large straw hat shading her eyes. Adrian wondered carefully. *Her?*

"Do you think we killed some aliens?" Adrian asked.

"What?"

"Like, when one of us dies, some star out there just goes flying away. What if it was someone else's star, like an alien's?"

"So what if it was. We'll never know."

"So what if our sun belongs to an alien?" he asked.

"No one owns the sun."

"Bu-"

"You can't look in outer space Adry. No one owns the sun, not here or on some other planet. You're just making things complicated."

She paused.

"Besides, if someone did 'own' the sun, in the way your legend says, I'd like to think it belonged to someone here."

"Oh." Adrian looked away again to the people on the street.

The sun was totally set now, the bronze scars fading into a crimson haze, slipping into a darkening blue. That bright orb was gone now, and Heather watched Adrian as his eyes fingered that fading thing.

I wonder what he could be thinking, she thought.

"It's gone," he said.

"It'll be back tomorrow morning. It always comes back."

Heather thought about people thousands of years ago and pitied them. What it would have been like to be without light! No light-bulbs, or street-lamps. Just a giant, gaping, bright hole in the sky that fell every day. And, the hell of wishing it back into the sky the next morning.

It always comes back.

She wondered about the people who still wanted their passed friends and family to come back, like they'll just come home from work one day and exclaim, "Wow, sorry I wasn't around, I was up working late," or something.

Not always.

She got up, wiping the dust from her pants.

"Come on Adry, let's go home."

Heather helped Adrian up to the point from which they could oversee the entire city as it sparkled to life. It was like watching firecrackers in extremely slow motion, one spark at a time lighting in response to the fading sun.

"The sun's setting," Adrian said, as if he had never noticed that before.

"Yeah," she replied quietly.

Heather sat down, letting Adrian gaze at his precious sun.

Ah, it's just another star among billions, Heather thought.

How can I live now? Just another star among billions, with no partner star to rotate with me? I'm alone now. I'm moving through space so fast, and it's cold, but now there is no one here with me. Heather watched the night approach, and thought she saw two dark eyes staring back.

How can I live alone?

They stopped at the cemetery, crunching through the gravel parking lot. Heather got out, and started walking. Adrian drifted behind.

The afternoon thunderclouds moved in, and the sky darkened. Heather picked her way carefully through the narrow cobblestone alleys, through the littered green grass.

She came finally to a tombstone, small and slim under the weight of the sky, still shiny and almost new.
"Haley."

Heather bent down a little and rubbed the top of the tombstone gently, softly, like one final caress etched on stone. That one she never had.

Adrian's boots scraped against the path as he looked around the cemetery. He wondered if everyone here had a star. If they did, it was a lot of people.

Backing away from the grave, Heather stepped onto a patch of grass between her friend's final resting place and the path. She stood watch, a sentry as stone as a tomb.

Watching his sister, Adrian saw her cross her arms and stare at the grave. He wondered whether or not she was expecting her friend to come back.

Adrian watched her for more than five minutes, and finally broke in.
"Heather, uh, are you okay?"

Heather snapped out of her reverie, and looked around for the source of the voice. She turned and found her brother, staring and waiting.

"Yeah. Let's go."

They stopped at the cemetery, crunching through the gravel parking lot. Heather got out, and started walking. *I should come here more often*, she thought.

With her eyes to the storm moving in above, Heather wound her way through the decadent puzzle, through the thin paths and thick grass.

She came finally to a tombstone, small and slim under the weight of the sky. A whisper escaped with her breath.
Haley.

Heather bent down a little and rubbed the top of the tombstone gently, softly, like one final caress etched on stone. *I never got that last hug.*

I never got to hold on to her, or maybe she'd be here beside me right now, poking me in the ribs and laughing. All I got were two bright, dark, eyes going cold, fading.

She backed away. *It only took you seventeen years. I'm going to be dying for another sixty without ever hearing your voice again.* She stood watch, a sentry as stone as a tomb.

She forgot about Adrian, and everything else. Something had constructed a nest of sorrow in her there, and that chirping bird told her that Haley wasn't coming back.

How do people live so long? They must face so much pain in so many years, yet they endure those decades? How?
"Heather, uh, are you okay?"

Heather snapped out of her reverie, and looked around for the source of the voice. She turned and found her brother, staring and waiting.

"Yeah," she choked, "let's go."

It was high up before Heather pulled the car over to a dusty side-stop. They got out and walked along a path to a set of rocks. The rocks pointed outward, down towards the gem-filled city.

Adrian shivered a little in his jacket.

"The sun's setting," he quivered.

"Yeah," she replied.

Quiet filled the air.

The sun set on empires and children alike.

Emptiness yawned.

Adrian watched his sun intently, letting his sister brood. He knew better than to ask, or even worse, assume. Especially when it came to the friend she lost.

He thought about the sun as it set slowly. *That sinking sun was no match for one person*, he thought. *Heather doesn't care about the legend I found, or the sun, but she cares about that person.*

She wouldn't care, he realized, *even if someone else really did cause the sun to set and die. Even if that person ripped the very sun out from above us, her friend would still be gone.*

Silence hummed around them.

The night was getting colder and colder.

The sun finally sunk.

"It's gone," Adrian said.

"It'll be back tomorrow morning. It always comes back," she replied.

Adrian waited for more, but none came.

She doesn't care, he thought.

Do I care?

Adrian thought about it.

I'm alive. I'm alive now, and no matter what, sooner or later I'm going to die, and not be alive anymore, and when that happens, it won't matter what happens to the sun, or moon, or stars, because I won't be here to see them. So what do I care about this legend?

Adrian didn't care.

The sun seemed to waver in its place beneath the sky.

It seemed to be getting a little darker.

Adrian was staring out the window at everyone like they were convicts.

"Stop staring at people Adrian, you're making them nervous, and worst of all you're making me nervous."

Where am I going?

Heather's brain ached and tried to come up with an answer. Her heart thumped on wordlessly.

Adrian apologized and went back to staring at people as Heather sighed.

Where am I going?

"Damn priest," she whispered.

Where am I going?

Heather tapped the wheel nervously.

Haley. I need to make sure what I'm doing.

And where I'm going.

She hoped that someone would have an answer. *Her?*

"Do you think we killed some aliens?" Adrian asked.

"What?"

Heather stood up.

"Thank you very much Father. We're sorry we wasted your time-"

"Oh, no no. Always glad to help. And again, if you need any help, or if you are going through troubled times, you can always find open arms here."

Heather stared.

She had never thought about that.

But how could this guy, this quiet academic with an expertise on legends, help me?

Heather remembered the priest they sent to counsel all of Haley's friends. Her "session" had lasted fifteen minutes.

You'll make it alright, he said.

Bullshit. Thanks for all the help and time.

Adrian cut in, and finally dragged his staring sister outside. She stumbled out of that ruin, dragging nothing.

When they got home it was quite dark outside. Their parents had left a semi-worried message. They were still out.

Heather went upstairs to take a shower, and when she got out, Adrian was almost sleeping.

She crept into his room.

"People die all the time, don't they," Adrian asked.

Heather turned around, surprised.

"I suppose."

"So I could be too late."

"Too late for-" she trailed off.

Adrian looked pained. *I mean, am I going to die?*

He answered himself.

Two weeks ago he had realized how great life was, and how happy he was. He realized that he was young and vibrant, and energetic. He was a child among the crippled old, god among men.

And he, too, would die someday.

"Does death hurt?" he asked.

Adrian watched her sister's face flex back into the shadows of the dark room, as if cowering from some enemy who had just struck her. He felt the silent echoes of the blow.

"Never mind," he said.

She reemerged.

"I'm sorry Adrian. I don't think I can explain it."

"Yeah, it's okay. And-" he paused, frowning, "I'm sorry about your friend. I guess I never said that."

"Don't worry Adrian, that was a long time ago. It hurts less in time," she said, smiling.

He stared.

"First thing tomorrow, we'll drive out to the pueblo and find the spiritual leader, or someone. Trust me, we'll ask around until we find someone who will know," she said, getting up to leave.

She closed the door quietly, but even after she left, he couldn't sleep for a while, because Heather was noisily rummaging through the medicine cabinet.

Adrian sleepily wondered what she was looking for.

The columns were singing hymns and smiling at Heather as she walked into the church. It was empty, and the powerful sun was bursting through the windows like a barbaric invader.

Beams of light melded with the columns and became an extension of the architecture; it was a bold addition bolted on by a solar whim.

The priest was sitting in the front row, looking quite hot and tired, and pensive.

Adrian strolled up.

"I have a question about death," he asked bluntly.

"Death," the priest said after a pause, "is a hard thing."

Heather condemned him silently.

How dare you!

To say that to me!

How dare you stand there, innocent behind your singing columns and tell me that death is hard.

They look so much alike.

Those big, dark, eyes, those puddles of black.

So dark, and yet so bright,

Shining, like what?

Short hair maybe, that shining,

Talking, mouth moving just like Haley,

Same name

Same? Reporter? She looks like my friend,

Older sister, maybe, so...no...

Similar, twin-like

Longing, the way

That mouth moves, just that frown-smile

Tugging at the bottom edge of a lip like some anchor

So beautiful.

Always the most beautiful, always.

I miss her.

Adrian apologized to the reporter, who was staring back at Heather. Heather had spent the entire time staring at Hayley Whitaker, the Channel 4 reporter.

"So it's not true?"

"I'm sorry," the man began.

Adrian stared hard at the wizened old man.

The pueblo was nearly empty, and very cold.

"...it's your secret now."

He nodded once, and walked away.

Adrian stood there.

"It's pretty cold," Adrian whispered to nobody.

Heather, nearby, walked up.

"I'll be right back, I'm going to use the bathroom."

He nodded emptily.

I guess it doesn't matter, he thought, *whether or not I care.*

It's not true anyway.

"It's just the sun. I'm sure-"

He turned around a few times.

"I'm sure someone can handle it."

"It's-It's pretty cold," Adrian whispered. It really was cold, and Adrian stopped turning, and tried not to be cold.

Heather came back, shivering in the cold

She saw the look on his face, mixed shock and disappointment.

"It's okay," she sighed, "not all legends are true."

"I guess it doesn't matter," he replied.

She gave him a puzzled look.

"I'd never find the person. I don't want to look anymore. It doesn't matter. I don't care."

"Why not, yesterday you said it was very important."

"Yeah, well, that was yesterday."

"And today?"

"And today I'm cold."

"But your legend-"

"It-it doesn't matter. I guess it's not important."

"One would think that the sun is pretty important."

"Not really," he replied, watching his sister wipe the wild dust from her eyes. A smile was finally dawning on her face.

"But it's a school assignment-"

"I don't have time Adrian. Get dad to do it."

"He won't be back in time."

"I can't drive you around. Besides, how are you going to find this person, huh? People are going to think you're nuts."

Adrian looked hurt, and thumbed his phonebook thoughtfully.

"Well, I'm going to see if it's true first."

"It's a legend. It's not meant to be true."

"There's this professor at the university who studies astronomy. He helped me buy my telescope. I bet he'd know."

"I know what he's going to say. He's going to tell you that it's just a legend, and that no one's death is going to make the sun disappear."

"Fine, but prove it. Drive me over there."

Heather stared at her little brother. *He doesn't understand*, she thought. *I wish I didn't. I'd trade all this knowledge if Haley would come back and tell me something wonderfully unimportant.* She frowned. *If only I could somehow show him what matters.*

"So there's this legend-" Adrian was saying.

Heather listened, bored. Adrian was chewing loudly too.

"Heather, you're not listening!"

"Yes I am."

Adrian pouted, and continued regardless.

"There's this legend, about the stars. The legend goes like this: every time someone dies, a star in the sky falls down, and that's what makes shooting stars."

"Uh huh," Heather mumbled.

"So here's what I want to know. The sun is a star, so what happens when that one person who is the sun dies? Will the sun fall down? I mean, isn't that bad? We'd all die!"

Adrian added sound effects to the death scene. Heather looked up. *What would he know? He's not that old yet, to be asking about death, even if it is just part of a silly story. He doesn't understand that even the sun isn't that important.*

"Not all legends are true," she responded.

The Verm Chronicles



The Verm Chronicle

Pt 1:

I was at a party. This is rather scary considering it is a giant party of very white astrophysicists. They dance like crap. And I was scared out of my mind.

So I drove to a tiny town in the middle of nowhere, where I stared at the moon and the stars and wondered.

First of all, I had been banned very recently, and of course, didn't want to come back in with the same name. This implies I use twister. That is correct. You are drinking a soda. Anyways, as I was driving back, I decided to take a different path in life. So, myself and a few others hopped a plane to San Diego.

I figured the freezing cold 40 ft waves would calm me down. Actually, they didn't help much. But I did have a fun time touring the

city, especially on the tour buses. Anyways, after cruising all of San Diego, I was on my way out on a large open air tour bus over the main bridge connecting San Diego with its sub-island (the name escapes me). However, disaster was soon to strike.

For some reason, the bus driver decided to take a swim. Of course, being on top of a bridge, this became a little dangerous. So everyone had to evacuate, and someone drove the poor man to the nearest pool.

I was traumatized. So I called a cab. I asked for the finest seafood restaurant in town (after all, San Diego is a coastal city). He recommended Pelican's. And drove me there. It was closed for renovations. I was traumatized. So he drove me to some cheap shop for fish and chips. I complained bitterly.

When I got back to my hotel room, I decided to look over the travel notes I had. In them I noticed a slightly infamous town named Tijuana (stay with me now).

Bright next morning, at 6:00 AM I was on a bus heading to Mexico.

The next 72 hours escape me. But the next thing I knew, it was 3:00 AM and I was on a bus to the United States. The whole experience collapsed upon itself, and figuring it was of little importance, I stowed the knowledge into the back of my mind.

Pt 2:

Back in town, I found the urge to go fish irresistible. Here's the incredible part. Hold on. I went to sleep thinking about fishing. The tale afterwards will live forever in time...

I found myself in a cowboy bar in Jemez, and I was looking for some bait. So I talked to the bartender, who wasn't really a bartender, and found some. So I went out to the lake, and from the rock dam I cast out my line. And I caught a fish. Only when I pulled it up, it was a boot.

So I dragged the boot back to the bar, and the bartender says, "did you take the foot to?" This confused me, so I bought some

more bait and went out trekking. I found a small side pond, underneath a concrete bridge, the ones with the little tunnels. There seemed to be plenty of fish there.

So I cast in my line, and I caught 19 rainbow trout. I was about to head out when the temperature suddenly dropped 90 degrees, and it started blizzarding. Now, I was in a forest with few supplies, and only myself, 19 rainbow trout and a boot. So, I managed to find some matches in a portapotty and I started a fire. After a while, the snow started slowing down, so I abandoned my roaring fire for the total warmth of my 1994 Toyota Corolla. Quite pleased at my catch, I decided to eat some. But where to cook it? I thought, maybe if I sell the 19 trout, I can buy some real food.

So I drove back to the cowboy bar where the bartender informed me that he wouldn't buy the trout. I asked around, but everyone else was talking about some kind of big forest fire a few miles away.

Unconcerned, I figured the town's only store would buy my trout. It was a giant Wal-Mart Supercenter on the outskirts of town. I walked in, where I saw 6 men assailing a poor man. I took my boot and beat 4 of them to death, the other 2 unfortunately got away. The man on the floor was on the brink of death. He told me that he had a very important package.

He said it was a very very rare, not to mention expensive, genetically enhanced spleen. Then the Wal-Mart exploded, since the 2 that got away must have planted a bomb. I think they were Canadian. So I drove back to the lake, which was covered by ice, and went rowing.

The boat salesman kinda looked at me funny, but heck, he was making money still. So I rowed out onto the lake (it was pretty difficult), just me, the boot, a genetically enhanced spleen and 19 rainbow trout. I kinda thought for a while, then decided my only friend in town (Mr.Barkeep) could help me. Anyways, I tied my boat up with some other boats as best I could, and headed back to the bar. When I got there, I could see trouble was brewing. That big forest fire had consumed most of local forests, and was burning up everything else.

Even worse, some idiot hadn't tied his boat down, in fact, that guy tied his boat with the other boats, and they all floated away and plugged up the dam.

I talked to the bartender, and he brought me back into a secret room, where James Bond was playing solitaire. They talked a lot. They talked about the Bureau of Canadian Terrorism or something like that.

I tried to listen, I really did, but they were really boring. Suddenly there was a commotion outside in the bar, and the bartender went running. Suddenly, James Bond yelled at me, and threw me some car keys. He said that I would need it more than he. Then he rocketed away on his jetpack.

Back in the bar, several armed men dressed in black had come in. I figured they wanted a drink, but they kept saying "eh" and trying to hurt the bartender. Anyways, I decided now might be a good time to go back home.

So I grabbed my boot, the genetically enhanced spleen, and my 19 trout and headed out. On the way out, I looked back and saw the bartender firing into the crowd while some of the Canadians were laying down wire. Somewhat confused, I walked around the corner and saw my Corolla on fire. Well actually, it had been firebombed by the Canadians.

Somewhat upset, I suddenly remembered Bond's car. I hit that little horn button on the remote entry, and for some reason it played the Star Trek theme. As I rounded the corner, I saw before my eyes a stylish, brand new, 2000...Pinto.

Yeah I was surprised too. Great Britain's spy project must have had some budget cutbacks. That or Q's successor was a real moron. I hopped in, and began driving away. All along I noticed that the lake was a little higher than I left it, and I didn't see my boat.

Also, it seemed a bit cloudy out, actually, more like fog, or smoke or something. I became more and more confused by the moment.

I stopped for some gas, and some guy started chatting with me about the fire, and the flooding. He had a thick accent, so I didn't pay much attention. I looked around my new 2000 Pinto, and found a 64 pack of Mentos in the back. There was a copy of the Communist

Manifesto in the glove compartment, along with a pack of gray stuff. I remember seeing something like that on the Discovery channel, SeaFor or something.

As I entered the main highway, I noticed a large roadblock, with what I think now were National Guard members. They said they were at war with Canada, Guam, and Mexico.

I remember Mexico, I've heard of Canada, but Guam?

I was kind of confused. I thought it was a joke, but they saw James Bond's communist manifesto. They thought I was Canadian, and hauled me to jail.

Pt 3:

I found myself in Atlanta, trying to explain some things. Apparently, a giant forest fire had swept across the entire west, consuming thousands of cities, forests, and farms. Also, the dam had burst, and had poisoned water lines all around the west.

It seems that the incident at the bar had led to international conflict, and the bombing of the Wal-Mart had caused a panic someplace called Wall Street, though I don't know why. They said Wal-Mart had lost everything, and had taken the rest of the marked down with it.

Someone named Dow Jones had gone down 10,000, and someone named Nasduck had gone down a lot too. Somewhat confused, I wanted to go home. Since they thought I might have diplomatic immunity or something, they simply kept some armed guards around my 2000 pinto with me, my boot, a genetically enhanced spleen, 19 rainbow trout, a 64 pack of Mentos and a copy of the communist manifesto.

I decided to use my resources. I bribed the guards with the Mentos, and drove away. I didn't get too far before I saw more police and army people. I abandoned the car, grabbed my stuff, and went into a building labeled CDC.

As I ran, people screamed, and they were all wearing suits for some reason. And all these lights were flashing. So I decided I

could distract them with the genetically enhanced spleen. I threw it at one of the guys in a suit. It was heavy. Then he yelled "holy shit!" and ran off, I don't know why.

Suddenly more alarms went off, and these two guys next to me suddenly vomited. I heard this ripping sound and they started bleeding from their asses. This concerned me. So I quickly ran back out, where people were running about like crazy, bleeding and vomiting.

A large plane was about to take off. It said: Air Force one. I figured it could carry me to safety, so I ran towards it. I stowed away in the baggage section. The plane was about to take off when this guy dressed in black headed my way.

Not wanting to take any chances, I ran back into my 2000 Pinto and drove away from that crazy town.

Pt 4:

Well it turned out I had made a small mistake. The man I helped at the Wal-Mart actually was a Guam assassin, carrying an infected spleen. Or that's what I figure. Because all I heard from the radio was that an Ebola outbreak was occurring. I don't know what Ebola is, but I assumed it had to do with ripping sounds and bleeding from your ass. Also, the giant fire had consumed most of the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Apparently, the USS Constitution, or one of those old wooden ships, had caught fire. In fear, the men manning the ships let it loose. There was an entire fleet of burning ships sailing off. And then there was this drinking water problem, and the price of bottled water and gone up like \$50. Despite the gas mileage on my Pinto, I only got as far as Kansas before I had to stop for gas.

Lots of stuff was on fire. And everyone was screaming and bleeding from their asses. Some jets were flying around, someone said it was the Canadians, but I never remembered Canadians having any sort of "aircraft" or military stuff. Must have stolen it from Russia.

At the farm where I found some gas, the sole survivor was a chicken named Marty. You might be wondering how I knew this, well he had a name tag.

It said:

We are all dying. John passed away last night, and he bled all over the kitchen. If the fires or the E Bola don't git us, twill be da Canadians. This chicken is named Marty.

The last part was the only part I really understood. So I took the chicken along with me. I took a couple of months wandering the North and South American continents. But that's a different tangent, I'll talk about that later if I have time.

After a few months, I sat under the stars, looking at the tapestry of magnificence, and like silk of a spool, I tried to transcend my puny reality based existence as a different plane of enlightenment. Or that's what it says in the essay I was reading.

I decided to go home. As I approached one of the huts, they had this weird wire thing, a telegraf? Anyways, they told me that some boats had caught fire, sailed across the Atlantic, and had caught all of Europe on fire.

Then the Russian and desert countries' oil rigs had caught on fire, and had consumed the last of Earth's oil. All of Europe was ablaze, and the Canadians had succeeded in capturing most of it. The Mexicans ruled most of the Americas. They said Asia was some kind of last haven, which I don't really understand, but those guys are smarter than I.

I gave them my trout, which were kinda moldy, but they ate them anyways, and looked at me like a god. They gave me their holiest of holiest weapons, 3 spikes. I put them on my boot and started to drive home.

Pt 5:

I returned home. Most of everyone had died, there was no drinking water because the lake water was infected with Ebola and the entire town was on fire.

I found Alpha in his shop, though I don't think anyone wanted a computer anymore. I gave him the Pinto, and he said that I could have it back if I ever needed it.

I found Jim in his formalwear store, but business was kind of slow. I gave him some trinkets I had gotten on the way home.

I found Onix in his home, writing another book. I gave him the Communist Manifesto. And I went home.

I recalled all the fun times my friends and I had. So I booted up my computer, and found subspace. I found a tequila in my fridge, and drank most of it. All of it actually. As you can imagine, I became pretty drunk.

Subspace was on one of my computers, and so I needed some floppies to move it. Since I was drunk, I walked.

At Wal-Mart, looters were everywhere. And who do I happen to meet but the old Bartender from the cowboy bar. He hadn't shaved in a while, but then again neither had I. He told me this:

"Since you left, many things have changed. After the Great Fire consumed most of the world, exactly 4.6 billion people were killed.

After the dam burst, it carried poisoned water all around the United States. When the US tried to ship in more water, that water had some new virus in it. The new virus had come from the CDC in Atlanta. It was a genetically engineered virus from those Canadian bastards!

The Canadians took everything, firebombed Washington DC, and invaded a crippled Europe. But with no oil left in the world they failed, and the resistance movement destroyed them.

All that's left now are a few towns, post apocalypse. Now, we would have nuked Canada but some ass left some C4 on Air Force One when it stopped in Atlanta. We think it was the Canadians"

I had a bad moment then, since I remembered forgetting something on board that big plane. No time now, the barkeep was talking again:

"After the President and the entire staff was killed, the US had no leadership. That leads us here.

The few resistance movements are struggling against the Mexico-Canada-Guam alliance, still in existence."

I told him he said Canada had been destroyed.

He said:

"Ha! No one kills Canada. They rule the world. The resistance movement drove them out of the US, but they are too strong. The resistance is trying to implant some US viruses, just like War of the Worlds!"

I figured he had gone nuts with his war of the worlds talk, so I bid him farewell and headed home.

Back home, Marty was chasing the Tequila's worm. I sighed, and put down the floppies I had looted. Then, The worm leapt up and struck me.

Somewhat dazed, my head hit the lamp. The last thing I saw was the package of disks. Verbatim. The last thing I heard was myself saying, Worm? And Marty squawking. I didn't know chickens squawked, I thought. Then I blacked out.

When I woke up, Verbatim and worm had melded into Verm. I looked it up in a dictionary, and the dictionary said "Verm is Latin for Worm." Cool.

Epilogue-

It's been 3 years now. Russia and the United States are in some big nuclear war, and lots of people are dying.

The Great Fire left most of the world barren and uninhabitable, and Ebola killed off most of the people. I still play subspace, occasionally.

I hear about the Resistance fighting Canada up north, but I figured I've had enough action for a while. I had Marty Cryogenically frozen. There are many stories I didn't mention in this story, for that would take far too much time.

There are more stories about my wanderings in the Americas, and about my time later up north on the Canadian front.

But for now, I'm happy telling the first part of my tale. The rest doesn't really have to do with my name. I never did find my boat in the dam, and when I went back to my old camping place, the entire forest was gone.

Hmmm, I thought, that big fire must have destroyed it. I shrugged, having fond memories of the giant roaring fire I had built and never put out.

And to this day, the boot I fished up from the lake still hangs on my wall, awaiting the day when the call will come again, and I will have to again venture out, and seek my destiny.

The Canadian Chronicle

Touching upon subjects lightly was never a strong suit. And the subject of Canada was always a strong...subject (since the war). Really, the war started after the small incident at the bar. That's, of course, a different story. A year after the bar incident, during some of the hazier years, I was sent to the front lines (I served on the eastern front, which happens to be the Northeast, New England, the second front opened by the Canadians in the fall of '97). This is the story of the Canadian War.

(Day before Halloween)

I was working with the 17th Special Forces task force for special tasks. The resistance was never one for naming its armies. They fed us mainly dried prunes so the Canadians couldn't use their diarrhea guns. Anyways, we were on a top secret mission to destroy

the Canadian Nuclear Power Plant, deep in enemy territory. We never got anything better than torn local maps. The troops I was stationed with had all moved out, myself with them. We were tagging along with 5th Calvary. Apparently, the 5th was known for being real party animals, and one hell of a fighting group. Being pretty new to the resistance against the Canadians, I was unsure about restrictions and rules. The 5th changed that. They partied every night. Anyways, on the way shipping out, I stuck my lucky boot to the underside of my favorite bench. And I left for Vermont.

We were all issued standard issue weapons, a carbine and some clips, and pistols. The 5th had their own weapons, apparently self issued, ranging from pointy sticks to miniature nuclear weapons. One of them gave me a what he called a death machine, but I thought it more resembled one of those magnetic wheel toys. Those were very confusing times. The caravan we were travelling with had many interesting wares, mostly in cooking. Being unable to actually cook, and having no money, I was one of the few who didn't buy anything. It was a long, harsh journey. They said that those fighting on the western front had a jolly old time in the rolling hills, but the eastern front was a postapocalyptic hell. The bombings had reduced the eastern United States into a land more pocketed than the moon. The few transport cars we had could move no faster than the camels. The tanks, what few there were, were also bogged down by the rocky road. We ate ice cream and talked to pass the time. I kept mostly to myself, I doubted anyone would ever believe my stories.

The day we arrived at the first camp, the caravan moved on north. We would press east a bit, and then move north. Luckily, if our mission was finished, we could catch the caravan on its way back to this very camp. One the first day, we also got our Ebola vaccines, in case the Canadians decided to get gutsy. Most of the men in the unit were hard faced vets, and had seen action on the western front, in the rolling hills of the great Midwest against the brunt of the Canadian attacks. After the Canadians took a big chunk of the north, they got caught up while trying to sweep east into the last official United States command centers in Virginia and Maryland. They were stopped at Columbus, Ohio, by the 3rd Resistance Army. The first major victory for the resistance came immediately after, pushing the

Canadians in a long battle all the way back to their ports in Michigan. Most of the vets were surprisingly calm about the Canadians. They said that though they were ruthless killing machines, deep inside they were nice. I had never actually met a Canadian in battle, though the incidents at Wal-mart and the cowboy bar had been enough. We were based in Charleston, a small town on the border of what the vets lovingly called "The Plains of Hell" or something like that. Apparently, after the Resistance abandoned DC and moved south, they followed strict scorched earth policy. Using nuclear arms, of course. Nothing was left but radiation. All the men in my unit, and the 5th were painstakingly made immune to the radiation thanks to healthy genetic tinkering. I didn't really understand the process myself. I was very tired at the end of the day, and just wanted sleep. And sleep I got.

5 minutes later, I was roused by gunfire. The Canadians were crossing the Wastelands to ambush Charleston. Unable to move any heavy artillery, they were relying on infantry. They moved in on our tanks, quickly disabling them without a sound. The alert didn't even ring until my entire unit scattered. We were given quick orders to head out towards the White Mountains in New Hampshire. From there we would regroup and head north. How we crossed the Wasteland was our own business. Apparently, the 5th was having a fun time killing our ambushers (or so I heard). I grabbed all my stuff and ran towards the wasteland.

Pennsylvania was totally deserted. Or at least, what I saw at first. Moving through the bleak gray landscape, the only objects taller than the horizon were dead trees that had survived total annihilation. I moved wearily through the territory. Some of my unit, I later discovered, headed east towards old DC, and found the place rigged with mines and explosives. Few of them made it out. I was pretty happy being alone in Pennsylvania, where I lived a short time. Unfortunately, the entire state looked like 3 mile Island times 10000000. Nothing alive, nothing normal at least. A few times, some hardy weeds or cockroaches would cross my path, and I would stand in amazement a few seconds, then move on. After journeying through West Virginia, it was almost nice to see nothing but gray. You can imagine how startled I was when I saw a distinctly

rectangular shade of gray in the distance. A town? I unholstered my pistol (since my carbine was somewhere in Virginia) and moved ever so slowly forward. It was a town all right, but an odd one. I never found out the original name of the town, but it couldn't have been that big. Those who lived in the town called themselves the sons of satan, or something like that. I don't quite remember. They were all very nice people, for being hideous mutants living off the barren nuclear wasteland. Their cooking wasn't too bad either. They gave me some bacon, and a small thermonuclear device, and sent me on my way.

Most of Northern Pennsylvania was crawling with Canadians and grotesque mutants. I never could tell the difference, but I assumed the Canadians were the ones with the horrible disfigurements. I never had to use my pistol though. Someone once told me that our unit all had resourceful people. I had only seen battle once, in Lansing's Last Stand in Michigan. I was just a civilian then, though I guess I could still be counted as a civilian now. After seeing that, I was inspired to fight for the Resistance. I signed up in the Resistance HQ in New Orleans, and after identifying me as a "dangerous man" they sent me up north, with the 7th army until they sent me to my most enjoyable times, in the 17th. As I trudged through Pennsylvania I reviewed our mission, and the Plant we were targeting. Impossible. As the Canadians once said, "It can be done, with enough patience" or something like that (the speaker had a thick accent). Once I got to Lake Erie, I rented a boat and paddled through most of Pennsylvania and New York, eating the mutant bacon. Fortunately for me, the water bridges between lakes still worked. As I landed, I only had a dozen more weeks to reach the base of White Mountains.

Of course, I was incredibly bored during my journey, and walking so much was very tiring. I figured that I would get used to the bleak landscape, but I never did. Upon reaching the White Mountains, I immediately sat down and took a breather. Most of our unit hadn't made it. Some had been captured by Canadian patrols, others had to turn back due to unfavorable radiation conditions or hangnails. Some went to DC to die (as I explained earlier). Our commander, by the way, was named Pete. Pete was a logger from Maine, and knew the area. I was slightly disappointed when he told

us that we would have to march north. The marching part made me frown. Within a few days though, I saw our target. The Eastern Canadian Remote Nuclear Power Plant was massive, sprawling across the death filled landscape. I was slightly worried that we would have to destroy such a large facility. I was told we only had to disable it. We would move on it in the morning.

(Excerpt, Journal, January 34th)

It's cold, and snowing. The attack begins tomorrow. Some idiot is playing with his fucking magnetic toy again, and he's pissin the hell outta me. Better stop snowing, or we're all screwed. I miss my mommy.

(End excerpt)

After playing with my magnetic toy a while, I went to sleep. When I woke up, the snow was blinding. The white stuff was blazing across the valley the Plant was in. Being on top of a tall hill, all we could see was white. I vaguely was reminded something about the last President before the wars, but the thought quickly slipped away. I moved with my small group down to a side entrance. We were to disable the safety mechanisms on the Plant. Others would disable the actual Nuclear process, and another group would distract the guards. We could not stand a full fledged confrontation with the Canadian Guard at this point, down so many men. I lumbered into the shiny metallic building. Even inside the temperature was a brisk -20 degrees Fahrenheit. My sweat froze, making it uncomfortable to move. As we moved along the dark hallways, we constantly heard gunfire from other sections of the building.

I was in the middle of the group thinking about hot dogs when the gunfire burst out. The first row of our men were mowed down as 2 dozen Canadians with M-16's jumped us. Being outnumbered, we hastily surrendered. We were brought to the main chamber, where the guards took us to a small closet chamber and locked us there. Inside, one of our members found startling news. This was not a Nuclear plant like the animal scouts had told us, but a

Fusion plant! (I guess that's what happens when you trust intelligence to a bunch of ferrets)

We were worried. We had to warn the others. We heard the constant hum of a security cart going by, and we decided to hijack one. We busted out of the room after I shot the door with my pistol. Breaking out, we shot a few guards, and hijacked a cart. We moved towards the fusion core, intending to finish our god given missions. Unfortunately, the Canadians were on a better mission, and we were stopped just short of the core. I could actually see the massive magnetic containment fields. With this energy, the Canadians would easily march south.

The Canadians lined us up. We were to be executed. Through them, we found out that we were the last of our unit that had survived, the rest having been easily stopped. As they were explaining this, a commotion occurred on the level above us. One Resistance soldier had gotten loose. Pete. He fired into the guards, and let loose a barrage of bullets into the control computers. But they locked down and the core stabilized. I shot a few Canadians, but they were quickly everywhere, and I was out of bullets. I threw my pistol at one, which didn't do much. Then I threw my magnetic toy at another. He blocked the toy with his arm, and it flew through the air, landing on the containment field with a buzz. It must of been some magnet, because it destabilized the core and started up a secondary fusion reaction. Everyone screamed, and ran for cover. Pete was already dead, but 3 other members of the unit grabbed a security cart, me, and some coolant. They shot the cap off the coolant and lit the end, propelling us down the hallways with amazing speed, away from the melting core. It was at this time that I distinctly remember that I forgot my thermonuclear device somewhere. I was about to tell the others, but then it went off. And that's about all I remember. For a while at least.

The next significant memory I recall is being in a Canadian prison in Michigan. Sampierre POW Camp. The heart of darkness for those who stayed here. I took it all in stride, but living off fish heads and mountain dew isn't pleasant to talk about. A lot of people perished in the Canadian Prisons. I never saw any of my unit members again, I later did some research and found they were sent

to camps in Maine, one of the last states to be liberated. By then, they had passed. We never got any exercise, but I tried to stay healthy (mainly by running in place). Mentally and physically, I became strong, and planned my escape. I stored up fish bones and made items for later use. And I found others already planning escape. Sampierre was a large prison, the underground movement was strong. They were quite surprised when I mentioned my mission. They had all heard about the 17th and its adventures. I chatted with an inmate from the caravan we were supposed to meet:

"Well, after you guys nuked the plant, I still don know how, but the 5th caught up wit da Canadians and sent their little "eh"ing asses back up north, ya get what I mean? Yeah, the 5th is marching west right now to free us, den we'll march all around and get us some Canadian's to kill"

He had some strong opinions. I met a very nice lady in prison, who happened to be a Resistance sniper who fought in Lansing. She introduced me to the large underground. They had been arming themselves for years, and I was welcomed.

When the alarm sounded the next day, I knew the call had come. The time was now, and the fight was here. Without warning, all the cell doors silently slid open, and suddenly the mob rushed through the prison. 10,000 angry Americans quickly mobbed any Canadians, and moved towards the Guardhouse, where weapons were. The 87th Canadian Army, one of the largest and most well armed, was stationed just outside of Sampierre, in Lansing. To get past them, we would probably need more than fish head knives. I still held on to mine though. Someone handed me a pistol. We rushed through the prison quickly, but taking heavy losses. From the top of the guardtower, machine gun fire quickly subdued any direct charges. Still, 1000 would die before all the Canadian guns were silenced, and we were ready to move on Lansing.

In actually, it was the 87th that moved on us. Hearing the call from the prison, they had set off while we were escaping. But the summer heat had bogged them down, and now they were camping a mere 3 miles south of Sampierre. No word from the 5th yet, as far as I was concerned, it was just us, all 9000 against the 45,000 of the Canadian 87th. And its tanks, artillery, and trained personnel. The

Resistance never really trained its troops, and our men and women were a pretty ragged fighting group. I was pretty glad the Canadians had no fuel for their aircraft. I was even happier they didn't have planes the next morning, when 20,000 of the 87th came rushing at us at dawn.

We lost the Guard Towers pretty early in the fight, the main crumbly concrete battlements of Sampierre were our only support. We lost the prison to artillery that day. That and 6000 fighters. Down to our last wills, hanging on by determination and fish head knives alone, we waited for night to come.

Night never came, as far as I was concerned. I knitted myself a bulletproof shirt, lined with Kevlar taken off a Canadian. After all, I couldn't sleep. The Canadian's shelled us the entire night, without end. The air was bright with the explosions of the shells, and the loud dull thuds of the bombs kept most of us up. Good tactics on the Canadian's part. Most of us figured, by morning we would either die of exhaustion or be unable to stop the 87th, which had its full army in Sampierre now.

Thankfully, morning came, and with it the 5th like bats out of hell from the south. Quickly pressing up against the 87th, the 5th sandwiched the Canadians between the scarred battlements at Sampierre and the massive 5th. We took the opportunity. The 87th couldn't support two lines of battle. If they turned one way they were flanked the other way. There was nothing to the north of Sampierre, it was a full 4 day march to the lakes, and evacuation. There was nothing to the south but pissed as hell American soldiers with guns. The 87th stopped in its tracks, and died in the hot summer sun where it stood.

Prologue

Journal excerpt:

Well we won the war! Ha just shittin you. Damn now I'm talking to a freaking book. 'nways, we're moving cross the lakes after this heat

wave passes, time to hit those damn Canadians in the nuts. Or in their homeland, whatever. God help us all.

End excerpt.

It was pretty bad, afterwards. I didn't look too much at the 87th, too much death for me. But I did get a chance to head south, to Columbus, the northernmost Resistance stronghold in these parts. I took a rest there, and volunteered to ship out for the invasion. I didn't want to fight anymore, I volunteered for naval duty aboard the USS Sampierre. They named a boat after us. I think nowadays there's a statue at the old Sampierre site too. Well I guess that's it for now. I never was one for touching lightly upon a subject. This one was more sad than funny, but I guess you could find some humorous stuff. I'll try to remember part of the war that was more lighthearted next time. I guess they found my fishknife later on, I hung onto it for good luck. In only 3 months, I would need it. Like a man with a fishknife on a ship named after a prison floating on the Great Lakes. Like a fish outta water, really.

The Chile Chronicle

I love chile. I have always loved chile. From the beginning to the end. My birth certificate should have read: "Bob Ornell, Chile Fanatic"

You don't want to know what my death certificate would read. It started with my birth. Well, a few days after that. They were serving chile at the hospital. My mother had some, mild of course, and a nurse convinced her, in her anesthetic haze, to give me a nibble. I was in love. I later puked on the nurse, or so the tale goes.

When I was 3, other kids played ball, but I spent time in the kitchen, breaking into the pantry and looking for chile. I had conquered the bell pepper, only to realize later that the bell pepper

wasn't a chile pepper, well, not in its "hotness" at least. You see, chile peppers are rated by Scoville units, a bell pepper rings in at an incredible 0. When I was 10, we moved to New Mexico. The native chile's there rate in at about 750 Scovilles. But I consumed them quickly, easily, and without a blink of an eye. At 12, Jalapeno's (5000 Scovilles) were like crackerjacks to me, buy a couple pounds and snack on them wherever I went. I turned into a chile freak. By 16, the mighty Tabasco (50,000) was nothing to me, and I drank Tabasco sauce for fun.

I had an iron stomach, and a titanium tongue. Not literally, but they allowed me to consume even the hottest of peppers without blinking. At 25, after graduating college a biochemist, I was given money by a local chile company to scout out hot chiles. This is where the real adventure begins.

My first assignment was to Thailand, for the mysterious Thai Chile. Chile's originated from South America, but were first found in abundance in Indochina, because of Columbus. He brought back the South American chile, and the Far East fell in love with them. Most people think they come from India. The Thai people consume a lot of chile, 5 grams a day. That's twice the Indian average, and about 100 times the American average. Americans are wimps. Except me. I found the Thai chile, and brought it home. It pinged in at 100,000 Scovilles, only twice as hot as my mild Tabasco. Both the company and I were disappointed, it made for a good chile, but impractical for Americans. I left the company, my chile expertise going to waste.

A few years later, I was contracted by DARPA, the advanced research government agency. Although the development of biological weapons was outlawed, the government figured they could disguise their program. They sought to construct a weapon of mass control, using the chile. At first, I scoffed at the idea. Then I realized that most people would melt under the fiery whip of the chile pepper. I accepted their offer. I was to have unlimited funding, and my mission: find the world's hottest chile.

I began with the obvious. The habanero. At 300,000 Scovilles, the habanero contains more capsaicin than a basketful of jalapenos. Capsaicin is the chemical that makes things "hot" and is rated by Scovilles. When a habanero is consumed, the glossopharyngeal nerve, leading from the tongue to the brain, experiences total anesthesia, and the trigeminal and chorda tympani nerve suffer radical damage. Consuming a habanero pepper usually causes enormous sweating, panting, and usually accompanied by unconsciousness in the weaker tongued. A rite of passage in Santa Fe, it is usually not eaten whole. It can cause immediate stomach problems, diarrhea and the such. But it was not a mystery to find, or so I thought. I hopped on the next plane to Santa Fe.

When I arrived, I high tailed for the nearest chile dealer, only to find, in my disappointment, that the fabulous habanero was nowhere to be found. I kept searching, but after a week, I finally settled in a café before I left, for a quick meal. After the meal, which was quite good, I smelled something wafting from the kitchen. Chile peppers. I pushed the waiter aside and went inside the kitchen, to find only some jalapeno grilling. But I noticed a breeze through the kitchen, the same breeze that made the scent waft in. It came from a dark back room. I forced my way through, flashing my government ID before I finally got in, and sat looking at rows and rows of habanero peppers. The chef and the rest of the staff admitted to stealing the peppers as a monopoly, and I had them promptly arrested. I had conquered the habanero.

When I got back to DARPA headquarters, my boss had a new lead for me. He said that he had found an even hotter chile pepper, somewhere in India. I shook my head and told him that the habanero was the hottest pepper. He gave me airplane tickets.

When I got to Calcutta, I wandered the narrow streets, waiting for my contact. Before I could get there, I got jumped by a band of mercenaries who wanted to sell me as a slave. Too bad for them, I carry chiles with me wherever I go. I slipped on a pair of gloves, and smothered them with chiles, their eyes burning and their

skin wretched and rashed, they ran off. I ran after them. They ran into a cloaked building, covered in rags. I ran in, and sprayed reinforced pepper spray at them, and ran to the back. When I got there, I confronted the man in the back. When I tried to force information out of him, he reached into his pocket. Thinking it was a gun, I sprayed him. He didn't even blink. Could he be as strong as me in the chile arts? He pushed me back, and took from his pocket a single, long, red, slivery chile. He swallowed it whole. Then his head exploded in a gruesome fiery display. Could that be the mysterious chile? I went to investigate his body, but there was nothing left of the chile but one seed. I pocketed it and headed home.

After my chemists analyzed the chile seed, it spontaneously combusted, almost burning down our lab. But they got a tentative measurement. 10,000,000 Scovilles. Something that hot would kill. As I saw it did. They got a biological trace going, and pinpointed the exact probable origin to South America. They saw me covered in blood, and decided to send a team with me. Hans, a European adventurer, armed with guns, knives, and more muscles than Arnold Schwar...that guy. And Laura, a quite beautiful rainforest expert, who knew a lot about the local area. Actually, I was quite happy working with Laura, though I didn't care much for Hans. I could never understand him.

We arrived in the jungle, the rainforest, whatever it is called, in search for what I called, the "Raise and then kill and then raise again the dead chile." Laura just called it the hellfire chile. I agreed that was a better name. We stopped at a local village to pick up clues. We met a scientist, who only went by the name Mr. Lopez. When we asked Mr. Lopez about the chile, he immediately offered to accompany us, saying he was the only non-native that knew where they grew, and the natives would not co-operate. He also explained that he could protect us against not only the restless natives, but the dangers of the jungle. Laura and I were quite skeptical about this, but he seemed to check out, so we brought him along. He and Hans led the way, ferreting out booby traps and the like.

A snake fell out of a tree, and landed on Laura's head. I rushed to her, and pulled the snake off, only to have the huge constrictor wrap around my neck. Hans pulled out his rifle to take a shot, but Mr. Lopez took out a knife, rubbed it against a tree, and stabbed the snake, which went limp and fell to my side. He explained:

"Damn things jump from the trees onto your head, and squeeze the brains out of you. The only thing that's more powerful to them is the venom of a Death Tree, which this is"

Laura thanked me for saving her, and we continued on our trek. Suddenly, along in the jungle, there came a break in the foliage, like a biological line. Laura examined it, and found that there were strange chemicals inside the x-zone of no life. Hans went in first, while Pez, (Mr. Lopez) explained that the chile killed off all life but itself. Inside the x-zone was a deathly quiet, and not even the birds sang. The air was filled with the reek of the chile pepper, and Pez had us breathe in our shirts. I saw why. My lungs, mouth, and nose started burning and itching, the pepper was so strong. We came to the first grove, and picked a chile pepper from the ground, examining it in reinforced gloved hands. My hands felt hot. The air around the chile waved.

Laura explained some time later that the chile's temperature was 450 degrees, while our body temperature is a mild 98.6- the chile absorbs heat from the ground and sun, but never cools down, it protects itself from enemies by melting them. If the unlucky animal gets close enough to eat it, the 10,000,000 Scovilles kick in, the capsaicin literally destroys the papillae on your tongue, making your tongue a bleeding, totally smooth and flat mass, the nerve endings shot. Your gums bleed, and degenerate, leading to immediate tooth decay. As the capsaicin burns through you, its opens up capillaries throughout your throat, and your neck swells. Assuming you live, the capsaicin settles into your stomach, in addition to other elements of the hellfire chile, and destroy your sensitive inner stomach lining, much like a radioactive exposure. If your neck or mouth does not

explode from blood rush, or your lungs collapsing, the bacteria from your intestines would rush into the burned out area in your digestive system, and you'd be eaten alive.

The tribesmen attacked as I held my chile in my hand. I quickly put the one chile in a foam layered titanium box, which was intended to hold nuclear arms. Hans loaded his rifle and took down 3 tribesmen before a spear hit him in the leg. As he fell to the ground, suddenly, he began screaming, and his clothes melted around him, his skin boiled, and he gooed into the ground. Pez, Laura and I ran away, but on our way out, a giant snake mugged Pez, who screamed for us to go on. We ran away, and I took Laura back to Washington with me. They made the bomb, replicating the chile's affects, and grew some hellfire chiles, though not to the original power. Latest update, genetic enhancement made the chile 5,000,000 Scovilles, still only half of the hellfire. The bomb, the "hellfire" bomb, melts a 3 mile radius, then launches capsaicin into the air, stopping anyone. It has yet to be used. The hellfire grenade, a small capsaicin/heat grenade, is under development for urban warfare. The original hellfire is deep underground in a testing facility.

Me? I live in Oregon with my wife Laura. And I've stopped eating chile, after seeing its affects. I walked into a Subway to get a sandwich, where I was prompted: "you want jalapenos on that?"

I asked for bell peppers.

The Awestrike Chronicle

The road stretched, empty and lonesome, into the forest. The road itself was simple enough, a two lane highway with small guardrails that seemed as useless as the road. The grass around the area was dead; the small totem polls of parched yellow occasionally poking through the mounds of snow. The snow itself was falling, slowly, as if the snow was taking its time reaching the ground. Small sheets sporadically fell, desolate blankets that simply added to the already thick layer that coated the ground. The road seemed to stretch forever into the distance, a straight line that showed signs of age. Forest and road mixed, the forest coiled around the road like a snake. The road, however, was the more powerful of the two; it had simply carved its way through the forest, but the forest showed signs of retaking the road. Through the weed ridden road, a single white truck blazed through. It was shiny, looked

new, though at second glance the slightly cracked windshield and worn appearance showed through a new layer of paint and wax.

With the same second glance, an onlooker might miss the two solitary forms in the truck. The driver seems awfully familiar, and though the beard is not as white and not as long, it is clear that the storyteller, indeed, was part of the story. His face was worn with too much life, and he frowned ever so slightly, a little strand of life that pulled his lips down. However, he looked happy, in a far distant look in his eyes.

The passenger, on the other hand, looked like he wanted to be anywhere than he was now. His face was gaunt and pale; he was obviously sick. He huddled in the corner of the front passenger seat, shivering slightly. His coat was drawn around him like a second layer of skin, but even then it slipped about him. He clung on to the jacket as if it were his life. He seemed to be slipping.

The driver was pretty sure now that his nephew was sick. It had begun as a cough along the way, but as the truck drove onward the boy grew more and more sick. As the illness progressed, the boy had grown less and less talkative, and had withdrawn within himself. He shivered.

"Uncle Pat?"

From the wheel, the driver shifted his eyes briefly on his nephew Ed, perhaps just making sure that he had not blacked out.

"I don't feel so good."

"I know Ed, but we'll be home very soon. It will be warm at home, and I bet your mother has some hot chocolate waiting for you."

The boy smiled grimly, and closed his eyes to take a nap.

"I bet his mother has a beating waiting at home for me," Pat swore under his breath.

The day had started as any usual Christmas Day. Everyone had arrived the day before. Pat, in his normal thought process, knew that staying home would be more trouble than it was worth. He thought, perhaps, if he went down to the lake, or perhaps to get some firewood, that he could escape his relatives. So, in a matter of minutes, he dressed, started up his truck, and unceremoniously kidnapped his sister's half willing son. Ed shared Pat's longing to be

away from the busting crowd of the house, but he knew better than to trust his uncle on such occasion. This was the same man, after all, who had taught his brother how to fish with dynamite.

They were going nowhere in particular when Ed caught ill. It was quite sudden and unexpected. Ed had been slightly sick for a week, but it seemed to erupt in the northern cold. It had snowed all day, the endless snow had frozen the earth solid. So, quite disappointedly, Pat turned the truck around and headed home.

The uncle's glances fell from the road to his unfortunate charge in brief spurts, never leaving either alone for more than a few seconds. The road itself was pretty straight, and required little maneuvering, however, the icy conditions and snow drifts were beginning to tax Pat's driving abilities. He could not keep the windows defogged and his nephew warm at the same time.

It was during one of his short temperature changes that he noticed that there was absolute silence in the air. Nothing sounded except the roar of the truck's heater and his nephew's labored breathing. The snow fell on. Pat wondered warily to himself, and looked quickly at his watch. The second hand was moving slowly as the minute hand crawled even slower. 11:52. Though he wondered why his watch was moving slowly, logical conclusions came up. I'm tired, he thought, or perhaps the watch's battery is dying. He looked down again. His watch had stopped. He looked at his nephew. For the first time on this trip, the boy seemed to be regaining color in his face, the ashen gaunt seemed to be draining away. Pat smiled and looked up just in time to see a large flurry of white slam into his truck and send it careening off the road.

The crash was enough to jar Ed awake. As he started up, he was jerked back by the force of the truck swerving off the road. As the truck came to a complete stop, Ed managed to take off his seat belt and look around. His uncle lay in the drivers seat, head slightly tilted to the right. He did not move. The truck itself was off the road, and seemed to have landed safely in a flat area below the road. Ed carefully turned over his uncle to see if the man was still breathing. He was. Ed gently opened the door, stepped outside,

and immediately fell over. It was just then that he looked down at his right arm. The elbow was bent in the wrong direction. Ed grimaced at the sight, and looked around. The truck was on an icy flat land with no grass.

Trees and clouds notwithstanding, the entire scene was very unnatural. The truck lay on an icy bed by the forest edge. Ed had managed to pull his uncle out of the car, and he stood over the unconscious body lying on the ice. He had not dared moved him any further.

When Pat woke up, only a few minutes had passed. Ed was standing above him, looking around nervously. His nephew's arm was bent in a very wrong direction. He got up, and Ed looked at him. Both had a look of surprise.

"Are you OK uncle?"

"Yeah, I'll make it. What about your arm? That...doesn't look right," Pat replied.

Ed simply shrugged, and pointed to a white mound forty feet away. Pat followed Ed's left arm towards the white object, and realized that he had hit it. He wondered if it were a person or an object. Or both. Pat started towards it, his nephew trailing slowly. The boy, Pat wondered, may look better, but he's still sick, and the dislocated arm isn't going to help. Out of a sudden moment of curiosity and inhuman distraction, Pat looked down at his watch. It read an eerie 11:52. It had not moved.

"Hey Ed, how long was I out?"

"Maybe a minute or two."

"But more than a minute?"

"Yeah, probably."

Pat thought to himself as he walked.

"Ed, does your watch work?"

Ed looked down at his watch. The hands had frozen.

"Maybe the accident jarred them, or the cold or something."

The reasoning seemed no comfort to Pat, especially when he reached the large white object lying by the side of the road. It seemed blended in with the snow, and only a thin outline of darkness could be seen around the thing, which shimmered softly in impossibly slow motion. It looked almost warm, as if one flavor of

white could be warmer than another in the dull cold of winter. Pat came to a complete stop right in front of the object and stared.

It was, with no other description available, a Yeti.

Ed recoiled in shock. The massive form was furry, and very definitely not a costume. It seemed to be breathing very slowly, but it was breathing. Ed had heard the children's stories of the Bigfoot and abominable snowman, but this? This was interestingly real. With his bad arm cradled in his hand, Ed slowly backed away. Whatever it was, it certainly looked big enough to crush both him and his uncle in one swipe.

Pat, on the other hand, bent down and felt for something by the Yeti's neck. Satisfied, he reached over on one end of the beast and tried to lift it. He grunted once, and flipped the beast over. It gave one short muffled cry, and then stopped. Suddenly concerned, Pat reached down again, and gave out a small cry.

"What! What did you do?"

"It's heart isn't beating!"

"You killed it?"

"I didn't kill it! Crap!"

"Don't these guys come in packs, or something? Won't there be another one?"

With that statement, Ed also turned and gave a nervous glance around him. The forest was the silence of snow.

Pat gave a grunt, and put his hands over the Yeti's chest.

"What are you doing now!"

"Why, giving it CPR of course," Pat replied simply.

Ed stared.

Pat heaved a few times, and breathed into the Yeti's mouth. He hit the chest really hard a few times. Ed looked very concerned until finally, with a single hard punch, the Yeti gave a little grunting noise, and started breathing again.

Relieved, Pat rocked back and sat down.

"You know how to give CPR to a yeti?"

"Uh, well, I know CPR. The rest was a little improv," Pat replied.

Ed still looked very nervous with the entire situation. His arm was broken, or at the very least badly dislocated. The truck, their only transportation within miles, was stuck on an icy plane several feet below the road. And he was sitting next to an unconscious Yeti. He sighed. It probably can't get worse, he thought.

At that moment, a loud crack was heard. Pat, startled, got up quickly. At first thinking it was a gunshot, Pat put himself in front of his nephew and the Yeti. But as he heard the second crack, he realized it had come from the truck. The ice below the truck was breaking. With a third, loud resounding crack, the four tires of the truck broke through. The truck sunk a foot or two, and landed on its frame with a crunch. The crunch was loud. And behind the staring Pat and Ed, the Yeti woke up.

Pat and Ed turned around once, only quickly enough to see the huge form of the Yeti rousing. It slowly got up as the two stood, paralyzed. It was nearly up to its full eight feet height before Pat's brain finally snapped and he started backing away. Quickly, the retreat turned into a full scale run, and he half dragged, half carried his nephew back in the direction of the truck. The truck, at least, was cover, and being in the open being chased by a Yeti wasn't a pleasant thought for Pat.

They reached the truck just as the Yeti spotted them. It gave out a guttural yell, and started walking towards them. With a frantic motion, Pat reached for the door. His hand never got there. There was a hideous sound, like a tree getting struck by lightning, and the ice underneath Pat, Ed, and the truck gave way. Under the ice, a deep watery body lay. The three tumbled into the lake. Pat and Ed fought to maintain their position near the surface. The truck sank like a rock. Pat looked down very briefly. He did not see a bottom.

Ed, on the other hand, looked up, and saw a very strange site. The Yeti had run over to the spot, and was pounding on the ice. The ice had somehow sealed itself again. The Yeti was furiously beating on the ice, which wasn't breaking, surprisingly. It was as if the Yeti still wanted to eat them. Well, Ed thought, better dead than eaten. It was his last thought before a dreamy darkness overtook him.

He woke up, rather suspiciously, in his bed. In his room. In his house. Alive. He quickly looked down at his arm, which seemed to have been miraculously healed. He got up quickly, finding himself completely rested. He dressed quickly, and reached for the knob of his door when it opened. Uncle Pat stood in the doorway, filling it. He stared at Ed very intensely, and spoke the same.

"What the hell is going on?"

Ed shrugged, and was about to say something when Pat started again.

"We died! Or we should have. Either we drown or the, um, um..."

"Yeti."

"Yeti, eats us! We don't live. Your arm is healed, my watch is working and, and..."

Pat simply motioned towards Ed's window. Ed pulled back the curtains of the room to discover the truck, in perfect condition; or at least in the condition it was in before Pat took it out on an excursion.

"Now that you mention it, I do feel better," commented Ed.

Pat and Ed stared at each other in silence. No one was going to answer the unasked question, except for perhaps Pat's sister. She walked into the room, gently knocking.

"There you two are! I figured that with all the relatives, you would have kidnapped my son by now Pat."

"Yeah, something like that," Pat said distractedly.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

"No."

"Good, than you can run an errand for me. It will only take an hour at the most, and best of all, you can take the truck away from this house."

She laughed gently as the two facing her turned pale.

"Don't worry. You know that today is a very special holiday, and we should be sharing in that spirit. The Haverfords, you know them, well their car is broken! Imagine that, on a day like this! At

any rate, being good friends and all, I've procured dinner for them, and all you need to do is deliver it! Isn't that easy?"

Ed and Pat gave nervous answers, and headed out of the room. Ed whispered to Pat hurriedly.

"Well we're back, as if that day never happened. Its still Christmas morning, but different. Then again, yesterday, or um, that other day, we left in the morning. I guess this is what happens if we don't leave. Different scenario, weird huh? Lets just forget about it ok?"

Pat laughed, and agreed.

The deal was set, or so they thought.

Pat's sister pointed towards a package on the kitchen counter. It was brown, ordinary. Pat opened it and began sorting through the contents. Turkey, cranberry sauce, and yams?

"Hey what is this stuff? It's not like it's Thanksgiving or something," Pat said, smiling ear to ear.

Pat's sister gave him a look that chilled him to the core.

"Of course it's Thanksgiving silly! Now go deliver it before it gets frozen."

Pat's smile dropped from his face, and from the corner of his eye, he could see his nephew running towards the nearest calendar.

And so, on an ironically cold and snowy Thanksgiving morning, Pat and Ed found themselves driving in the same truck down the same road. They both had a general idea of what was going to happen. It loomed above them like some cloud of rain, refusing to hit them with fate's hand yet, simply toying. Ed shuddered in a corner, not out of illness, but out of fear. Fate was something to fear. He clutched the Haverfords' food.

Pat drove, not paying much attention to the road. He pondered the events of the future, and wondered what exactly happened. On closer inspection, the truck and Ed had both proven undamaged. Unless the entire family had somehow pulled off the biggest prank of all time, this was indeed, a strange day.

As the place of the original incident grew more and more familiar in Pat's mind, a thought suddenly came to him. He looked

down at his watch and read very carefully. 11:52. He looked up and saw a flurry of white. He was almost ready this time, triggered by some memory, and swerved wide left, away from the icy lake. Ed gave out a short cry before the seat belt and a suddenly airborne turkey silenced him. The truck groaned in protest as the turn was painfully executed. He did not hit anything, but the maneuver tipped the truck over. It rolled down the side of the road to come at a stop on a large icy frozen and flat land, desolate of all life.

"Aw crap!"

Ed didn't look happy. His arm wasn't shattered, but then again, they were apparently still on a frozen lake. Pat was unhurt also. The truck was sitting on the slippery surface of frozen water. Both were looking around for the Yeti.

"Did you hit it?"

"Hit what?"

"The, thing!"

"No, I didn't, but maybe it went on the other side," was Pat's careful reply.

The day was cloudy and cold. The forest was as still as ever. The ice reflected a deep blue, like an iceberg. Ed and Pat huddled around the truck. It would not start.

Ed reached in for the package that was their charge, and opened it carefully.

"Well, I think we'll need this more than the Haverfords," he said.

Pat gave a cry, and quickly reached over and plucked the box from his nephew's hands.

"No! The Yeti will smell it!"

It was too late. From the other side of the road, an interesting grunting noise echoed.

"Uh oh."

"Run!"

They ran. Ed's first instinct was to drop the box, which he did. He lay on the ice, frozen. Behind them, the Yeti approached, running far faster than anything its size should. It was waving its arms in a seemingly familiar motion. Ed was reminded of the Yeti

pounding on the ice after it closed in after him. It was like it was trying to get at him. Or warn him. Or eat him.

From the ice, an all too familiar cracking sound was heard. The ice broke under the truck; this time, it did not rest on its frame. The fragile ice crumbled, and the truck dropped in. Ed and Pat stared in amazement as the truck bobbed a few times, then floated. Pat stopped, and took a step towards the icy lake.

"Trucks don't float!"

The Yeti was near the truck now, still waving its hands. Suddenly, the ice under one of its feet gave way. Its front foot went through the ice and it fell with a loud shriek. Pat, against all instinct, ran forward.

"Gotta help it!"

Ed stayed back just a moment to see the truck suddenly float out of the lake onto dry land. Below its frame, a massive greenish blob detached itself from the dark waters of the lake. It looked, to Ed's eyes, to be a giant snake. It reared its ugly head above the water, flinging the truck away like a rag doll. It crashed into the forest with a huge shattering boom. The Yeti shrieked in unison.

Pat was running towards the monster in the water, which now had risen some forty feet in the air, with a long green slimy neck exposed. Ed's uncle was waving and yelling, trying to divert the beast from its current attention, the stuck Yeti. Pat dropped to one knee, searching for a rock, anything to throw. The monster made a shockingly quick strike towards the box of goodies for the Haverfords, in two seconds, the box was no more. It didn't look like one turkey and some yams would satisfy a Loch Ness monster.

Ed saw his uncle running towards the beast. He ran towards him, yelling at him to get back. At that moment, the Loch Ness monster swerved and looked right into Ed's eyes. He stared, frozen, something tugging at the back of his mind, but not strong enough to release him. Medusa, with eyes so bright, to freeze the world in stone. The monster struck, moving forward so quickly that no one could follow. And before Pat could even move or scream, it ate Ed.

to his head. The cuts were healed. He cursed under his breath, and ran to the window. The truck was in the driveway, in perfect condition.

Ed burst into Pat's room suddenly, with a wild fearful look in his eyes. He looked like had just been robbed, maybe not of some physical possession, but perhaps of his sanity.

"Uncle!!! What the hell man!"

Pat simply shrugged, and dressed very slowly. He was pretty sure he knew what was going to happen. He motioned to his nephew.

"Come. I'm going to go sort this out. We're going to drive out to that spot, and see if anything changes."

"Oh! Oh! And then what, we get abducted by aliens, and haunted by ghosts, and wait, wait, no, we talk to a unicorn!!!"

Ed was furious. He felt like a mouse being toyed with. It was a sensation he did not enjoy.

Pat didn't say a word, he simply grabbed his keys off of his nightstand.

"You coming?"

His nephew silently and gloomily followed him out a door, as Pat's stunned sister looked past the two, wondering, quite worriedly, where they were going.

Pat's plan, Ed admitted, made sense. If they had stayed in the house any longer, they would have probably been goaded into doing something that involved taking the truck out to the exact same spot. Instead of playing along with fate, his Uncle had decided to meet fate head on. His plan was simple: drive out to the spot of the incident. Wait until his watch stopped, at 11:52, and see what happens.

When they arrived, they were a few minutes ahead. Pat stopped the truck.

"The last two times, when we were driving, we hit the Yeti. This time, we walk to it. I'll leave the truck on the right side of the road, away from the Loch Ness monster, and unlocked. We can run back to it at any time," Pat said.

Ed was not very comforted.

But Pat was right. The Yeti was standing on the striped line in the middle of the road. Had they been driving in full speed, through the snow, the camouflaged beast would not have been seen. It was waiting for them. A chill went up Ed's spine as his last thought echoed. It was waiting for them.

It waved slightly at them. The sky darkened a bit. Gray clouds edged in with fragments of ice on their tips. The air grew nippy. The Yeti stood like a statue in the road. It looked like a scene out of a fairy tale. He stretched his arms upwards, towards the sky, and gave a deep yell that shook the minds and souls of the two humans watching.

From the sky came a return, a thunderclap which shook the trees with its power. And from the sky, a giant dark shape descended, until it was almost upon them. It was metallic, dark, glistening with lights and juts. Ed and Pat dropped to their knees in awe.

"You know," Pat said, "when I was nine I thought I had been abducted by aliens. Up until now I thought that was a dream."

With that, Pat, Ed and the Yeti were whisked away into the ship, which took off into the gloomy day sky.

They awoke strapped down to huge chairs, which looked as ancient as the ship. There was a stereotypical soft mechanical hum. No little green men had introduced themselves yet.

Out of the corner of Ed's eye, he saw a white blur moving. The Yeti had been taken too then.

Just then, a loud whish filled the air, as something opened with steam coming from it. A dark figure advanced into Ed's view, the only shape visible. It was tall, dark, but otherwise looked very un-alien.

It drew back its hood.

It was himself.

"You know, Ed, you got pretty luck, twice. Good thing you didn't get killed eh?"

Ed looked back, in shock. He could not speak.

"Ah don't worry, we're not going to hurt you. And we're not aliens either! Or, not in the normal definition."

From Ed's right, an answer came, in the form of Pat's voice.

"Let us go."

"We can't do that just now," the voice trailed, "maybe later..."

Ed looked for the Yeti, and strained but could not see.

"Don't worry, it's fine."

He looked into Ed's face, eyes gleaming. Ed shuddered involuntarily.

"It's very simple Ed. We are from the future. We are here to imbue the wisdom of a millenium upon you! Embrace this knowledge, and you shall live as gods among men."

"You're nuts," was Ed's only reply.

"What about you?"

The figure pointed to Ed's right, where Pat must have been.

"Samey same, your crazy. This is all a dream anyway," Pat said.

"If only it were."

"La, la la la, la la la,"

"Silence!"

"Why would you want to tell us about the future?" Ed asked.

"Simple. If you knew what we knew, you could conquer Earth! None could stand before your might, like none stand before us."

"Breath mints, that's why no one stands before you," Pat cracked.

"Silence! We are gods, in a manner of speaking. No one dares oppose us!"

Suddenly, a snapping sound was heard behind Ed. The future Ed looked past him with a sudden bad look on his face. The Yeti had escaped. The words reflected off his eyes. Another whish and the future Pat was in the room, motioning.

"Subdue the beast!"

The Yeti moved very quickly, a blur of white that swiped at the future Ed. Ed stood paralyzed in his seat. The bindings around his arms had not been released.

In a crimson blur, the future Ed went down, face down, in a pile of blood. Ed looked horrified. The Yeti knocked the future Pat back with one giant swipe of his paw. With that, the force that bound Ed and Pat was destroyed. The bindings slacked, and Ed quickly climbed up. The two stared at the Yeti, which stared back.

"Urgh..."

It waved towards a door.

"Thank you," Pat said.

"But I don't understand! What's going on?" Ed voiced.

"Doesn't matter Ed! Jump first think later."

Pat grabbed his nephew by the arm and pulled him towards the door. It opened silently. Behind them, a very human scream was heard. They shuddered, and moved on. They came to an open bay, which lay open to the forest. The ship, or whatever it was, was hovering slowly above the ground.

"Jump!" Pat yelled above the rising wind.

With that, Pat pushed Ed off, jumped himself, and plunged into the dense forest canopy.

When Pat opened his eyes next, there was a strange looking man bent over him. The man was short, with an untrimmed mustache. It poked out from under is short nose. The man was holding something that smelled very minty under Pat's nose.

"Hey mister? You alright?"

Ed woke up next to Pat.

"Where are we? Who are you?"

"Why, you are on the side of the road. I found you guys here."

Pat slowly got up, bruised and battered from his fall. He was barely up before he got knocked back down again by what he saw. The truck was sitting on the road.

"This your truck sir? Were you guys in an accident of sorts?"

"Yes, you could say that," Pat replied quickly.

"Well, neither of you look to be in much shape to drive home. I'll give you guys a lift, but I'll have to use your truck.

Pat numbly handed over the keys, and put himself in the front seat. Ed squeezed in next to him.

"So, what exactly happened to you two?"

Ed, who was rocking gently with cold and pain, broke down, and related the story to the stranger. Later on, Ed claimed that he had no idea what had come over him. Something within him willed him to tell this strange, impossible, downright insane story to a total stranger who had been wandering around a barely used road on a snowy day without a car. Despite all that, Ed felt a need to tell the story. The sound of the story on his tongue was almost reassuring. The stranger never laughed, or interrupted except to ask a question on a few details. Afterwards, the man stared straight forward as if the entire story were true.

"Well, that is quite a story. Have any idea what those things mean? I mean, the Yeti, monsters, time stopping thing?"

Silence filled the truck, agonizing.

"I was born at 11:52 AM," Pat said quietly, nearly at a whisper.

The stranger gave him a quick glance. Ed stared.

"What's that mean Uncle Pat?"

Pat gave no answer.

The stranger sat back in his seat, driving comfortably, thinking. Then he offered a response that neither the men would ever forget.

"You two are very lucky, I think. I hear a lot of crazy stories, and they are mostly false. It's man compomsing stories. You two though, you two were saved by your story. You aren't just part of this whole fable, this whole tale, you are the story."

"Are you saying that you think we made this stuff up?"

"Maybe. I don't know. Does it matter whether you made it up? I don't care, nor does anyone else. As long as you believe that this happened, and it changed you somehow, it doesn't matter what I think."

"I don't think what happened to us was very enlightening," Ed said.

"Ah, you know, most of the stories we hear nowadays are about people dying and suffering. But here, here is a time and place where life was...preserved. I think someone is watching out for you two. If that not enlightening-" he trailed off.

"But who," Ed replied, "it wasn't those weird guys from the future was it? They wanted something else, something strange. No, they wouldn't preserve life."

"But if it wasn't them," Pat said, "who?"

The question lingered in the air, hanging like some unshakable frost.

No answer came.

The stranger relaxed even more.

"Don't worry about that now. You guys have had quite a day, if you can call it that. I'll make sure you get home in one piece, without further incident. You can go to sleep now."

Ed nodded wearily. Pat yawned.

And they both dropped into a peaceful slumber.

On a gloomy winter morning, Dan took the truck out. He had only driven for less than twenty minutes when he saw the shapes by the road. They looked vaguely human. Dan looked down at his watch. 11:52. He was going to be late. Pulling over, he stopped at the side of the road, and stared down. It was his brother and his uncle. His eyes bulged a little, and he quickly climbed out of the car.

"What people find on the highway these days," he muttered.

Ed was mostly quiet on the way home. Pat had also not spoken a word. Dan had, several times, tried to start a conversation indirectly with hints and nudges, but the two would not speak. Finally, Dan asked very bluntly.

"So...what the hell happened to you guys?"

"You wouldn't believe us," Pat said.

"Try me."

Pat did not respond.

"How's the truck?" Ed asked.

"Just fine. Not a scratch. Was sitting outside this morning just like normal. Why, you get it in some accident I don't know about?"

Dan chuckled.

"What day is it?" Pat asked.

"Why, it's January first of course! You guys partied a little too much huh? So, really, how'd you get out here?"

"What time is it?" Pat asked, ignoring the questions.

Dan looked down, frowning. His watch was dying, time for new batteries. He tapped it a few times.

"Damn watch, uh, well, about...11:52. But I think my watch is broken," Dan said, angrily shaking his watch. Pat rubbed his hands together and tried to warm them up. All that could be heard was the truck's heater blasting away, a hot roar against the bright, cold day.

Ed sighed and reclined back in his seat.

"Mom's going to kill me."

There was no reply.

Pat and Ed sat back in their seats in the truck and marveled in awe at the oddity that was life.

The Lamp

There was a junkyard, once,
Where we explored as children
It beckoned recklessly,
As we moved.
We found treasure,
A trove of forgotten goods,
And clocks that run only in little children's dreams.
But my find, my gold,
Was the lamp.

It worked, in a sense,
After all, it fizzed,
Sparked like a wretched fourth,
Bursting forth like a
Diminished minor
Blinking like the confused
And then!
Light! A slow light,
Pouring the sun down
Onto forgotten goods,
And clocks that run only in little children's dreams.

But there must be an end,
The bulb faltered, and sizzled once.
That once bright mirror,
Fading into night
And dark.
And little things until the ticks grow heavy.
Then there was nothing more.
Silence. Darkness.
And we threw it back, we
Returned the lamp to its home,
A home among treasures, troves,
And clocks that run only in little children's dreams.

The Haunted Chronicle

(Or "A Ten Page Fiasco in the Dreams of _____")

Ed stepped out into the mud and misery and swore softly. His voice was instantly carried away by the sweeping, howling wind that flew wildly against him and everything around him. The mud was deep, and his brand new sneakers sank deeply in, until mud tickled past his socks and made him feel like he was wading through mud, which he was. It wasn't funny to Ed. He gave his deepest insanity driven glare at his Uncle, who was beaming like an idiot on a beach, only he too was sunk in a foot of mud on a bleak cloudy day in the middle of nowhere.

Of course, Texas is not nowhere. It's certainly noTHING, but not exactly nowhere. It's actually a state in the southern portion of the United States of America. Its panhandle is swamped by tornadoes, its southern border swamped by Mexican immigrants,

some of which are fortunately legal, and its mainland is devastated by drought, heat waves, and general stupidity. Which makes it a perfect place, according to Pat's logic, to set up a business to harness the energy of the sun. He could have chosen, say New Mexico, but why? Texas is big.

Texas is also a long ways from Michigan. Ed's portion of the story is much shorter from Michigan to Texas. His story goes something like this...

Ding. Dong. Ding dong. DING DING DING...

Creak.

"Hi Uncle Pat."

...and somewhere in the distance of the house: "OH GOD NO!!!"

"Hey Ed. Wanna go to Texas?"

"Te-"

Two minutes later, the two were well on their way to Texas, thanks to the non-existent Mid-West police force. Of course, Pat has lost a possible position at a pet store, importing parrots. Unfortunately, the police raided the pet store, and found in the back nothing less than half a dozen monkeys, rare African gray parrots, one donkey, and about thirty-six Canadian illegal immigrants. Who were being housed in the same room with the monkeys, parrots, and donkey for about a dollar a day each. In case that's a little mind boggling, lets put it in simpler terms. The place was shut down.

So what now? Well, Popular Science, Pat told Ed on the way to Texas, contained a new article about the huge money potential in photovoltaic cells. So despite a lack of business savvy or technical knowledge in the field, Pat bought a thousand acres in Texas. That's where the trouble began.

Of course, Pat's idea of Texas was the dry, sunny, stupid image most Americans had. Actually, that image of Texas and its inhabitants is absolutely true everywhere in the universe except for Texas. There's a scientific term called entropy, that refers to disorder, and a very important law stating that the general entropy of

the universe is always increasing. That is, the universe is continually getting messier. Let's examine the United States. It would be true to say that the United States has been getting more and more organized. Businesses and Internets and whatnot. Oh, but wouldn't that violate that really important rule? Why sure, except that the rule says the universe as a whole. So where does the universal disorder come from? Simple. Texas.

So upon arriving in Texas, it began raining. All the brilliant natives had their windows rolled up, but Pat had his rolled down when the thunderstorm erupted above him, sending rain into the truck. By the time they arrived at Port Isabel, they were soaked and soggy. He was given directions to his newly acquired land, which was curiously supposed to be housed on an island. Pat was not aware there were any islands in Texas. He took the road down, and up, and God knows where until he came to a point where the road simply stopped.

"How long have we been driving?" Ed asked.

"Long time. But here the paved road ends. There's a sign, but I can't read it."

"That's because it's raining outside."

"Well I can't leave the car, I have an aversion to rain."

"You're scared of rain."

"No, but I don't like rain. You go look."

Ed sighed and got out, ran forth a few meters, and ran back, slamming the truck door and shivering.

"What's it say?"

"Danger."

"What else?"

"That's all."

"What a crappy sign."

So Pat ran it over. It creaked and went under the truck. The truck was blessed, by the way. No harm could come to the truck. That's another story though.

Then Pat began driving. The directions given by the self-appointed idiot back in Port Isabel said to drive until he came upon a towering house and beyond that, a large monolith facing into the Gulf of Mexico. Odd directions. They soon discovered why the road had

ended. It wasn't really a road after some point. Rather, it was a river. And it was raining. After a while, Pat turned off the ignition and let the river take the truck where it wanted to go. Pat was not aware of any rivers in Texas.

They rode the currents for some time before finally, in the distance, the groggy horizon grew clearer, until the rain stopped. Ed could see, in the distance, a house, and beyond that a towering black stone.

"Well I'll be."

The truck dropped 10 feet into the river.

"Holy crap!"

Pat struggled for control of the truck. He quickly inserted the key and started up the engine. The radio buzzed merrily:

"I can see clearly now, the rain is gone..."

Ed hit the radio, hard. They were totally underwater, and both of the men experienced bad, bad memories. Finally there was a splashing sound and the truck stopped moving. The waters gave way around them. They were sunk in four feet of mud. The truck couldn't move.

"All right I'm going to get out and see if-"

"No!"

Pat opened the door as a backwash from the river drowned the truck. The radio chirped.

"Sunshiny day..."

"Here we are."

Ed stepped out into the mud and misery.

"Damn!"

He looked around. They were at the end of an island, a narrow one. It was like a very small cape. The ocean stretched around them.

"Didn't the man say the place was a thousand acres? This can't be more than a hundred."

"Well we might as well go in. Maybe the broker is there."

Pat was pointing at the colossal mansion in front of them. The house was dark, huge, and foreboding. Still, there was no way a thousand acres could fit in that one house. Unless...nah.

Leaves swept off of a few dead trees, and landed at the knees of the two. They walked up a flight of stairs leading to the house.

The stairs went up and down randomly, probably just to irritate anyone trying to (read) actually get to the house. Ed labored.

"I didn't come to get exercise and fresh air," Ed said, sniffing the putrid air.

"Sorry."

"Come to think of it, why did I come?"

Finally, they reached the front of the giant house.

"It's like something out of a creepy movie," Pat said.

"Yeah...great."

"Okay, time to see if anyone's home."

Pat reached out and grasped the bronze knocker, banging it hard four times. Everything was still for a moment. The wind stopped and all around, total silence dominated. Then, suddenly, the door cracked open, and a doomed wind leaked in, causing a roaring howl that whispered insidious thoughts. The door slowly creaked open.

"Ugh, come on come on."

Ed finally lost patience and gave the door a hard kick. The door, oddly, made the sound a dog would make had it been kicked, and opened completely. They entered, and the door, still whimpering, slammed shut. Locked from the outside of course.

"Damn, I knew it would do that," Pat swore.

"Hello! Is anyone there?"

Ed's cries echoed through the house for a long time. Maybe it could be a thousand acres in here. How many feet are in an acre? Or is it metric. English? Don't the English use metric? Ed stopped thinking.

"Hey! Who the hell are you!"

Ed looked up. The cry came from the top of the huge stairs, where a dirty looking man in a repairman uniform was standing with his fists to his hips at the top of the stairs, in front of a giant evil looking portrait.

"Who are **you**!" Ed cried back.

"Hey Fred we got trouble makers."

"Really. Who are they?"

"They won't tell me."

"Did you ask?"

"Yeah, what do I look stupid?"

Fred emerged, a little smaller but looking very similar to Al in his own uniform.

"Who are you?"

"Who are YOU?"

"WHO are you?"

"Who-"

"Stop!" Pat yelled. "This is nonsense. My name is Pat, this is my cousin Ed. I own this property, and I'd like to know what you guys are doing here."

"The name's Al, and this here is my associate Fred. And for your, information, we are repairing this damned house, but we got lost. There's no central heating anywhere to fix. You own the house, maybe you can figure it out."

"I have the blueprints in my truck."

"We have the blueprints," Al murmured, "but they don't work."

"What do you mean? Blueprints don't work." Ed said.

"That's what I'm saying. See," Al said, "the kid gets it."

Ed sighed.

"Ok we'll come up and take a look."

Pat and Ed labored up yet another flight of stairs, finally joining the repairmen at the top of the stairs. Al led the party into a large bedroom, adorned by beautiful furniture. At a large table, a box of donuts held the blueprints in place. The box was empty.

"Alright, the blueprints show that beyond here, there should be a hallway leading to a small room where all the heating and water can be controlled," Al said, pointing to a door.

"But..."

"But nothing."

"What?"

"Look for yourselves."

Pat went up to the door and opened it. There was no hall. Just a wall. Just enough room for the door to close.

"What the hell?"

"Yeah, yeah. But get this, there are no other doors on the blueprints besides that one, the one leading in, and the bathroom, which is normal."

"By God that bathroom is fine," Fred said. Everyone stared at him. "What, it is."

"Okay, go on," Ed pressed.

"Look around kid," Al said. Pat and Ed did so. Around them, besides those doors, there were three more. Both quickly scrambled to check their find on the blueprints. No such doors appeared.

"It gets better," Al continued, "because me and Fred here just went in to one of those doors. There's a hallway going about twenty feet in before we realized something."

"What?"

"Stay here," Al said, "and look out that window."

Pat saw what he meant. A door apparently opened into the exterior of the house. It couldn't have led anywhere, because, upon looking out of the window, Pat found that the door led to sky. Al opened the door and walked inside. Pat stared out the window, where Al did not appear, or fall.

"Haha, I could get some donuts from in here."

He re-emerged into the room.

"I guess the house is a thousand acres," Ed whispered to himself.

"Damn right kid, probably a million. It's a vacuum cleaner's dream."

The sun slowly set as the four sat discussing the implications of the house. Pat was a little disappointed. He couldn't think of a way to put solar cells in the inside of the house.

They decided to stay the night. The howling wind and dark skies warned that the storm was returning, and Pat didn't see how the truck could have gotten out. The repairmen shrugged, saying

that there was plenty of food in the kitchen. The kitchen. It always begins in the kitchen.

Ed and Pat crept down the gloomy stairs into the kitchen. The repairmen had said the food was in a pantry. They arrived and padded across a giant linoleum floor finally reaching the one and only door, which led into a giant pantry, with its own freezer. One could live for months off the food in there.

"Hey," Ed called, "you guys want anything?"

"Yeah, if you find a beer, we could use a drink or two."

Ed grabbed a few beers, while Pat grabbed some an armful of junk food. Finally they closed the pantry door and set out. They went back towards the stairs when Ed suddenly paused at the bottom of the stairs, in the middle of the giant lobby, his ears perked, listening to the soft sounds of the house, smelling the jar of chocolate icing in his hands. They had moved past the chandelier, and their shadows embraced the red carpet of the stairs.

"Come on Ed, move."

"Shh. I heard something."

"Hey, you two alright down there?"

"I thought I heard something."

Immediately, Fred and Al were at the top of the stairs, staring at the two at the bottom, frozen in place, listening carefully, their arms full of beer and pretzels. Fred headed down. He walked past them until he was nearly right under the giant chandelier.

"I don't hear anything," he said.

Just as he said that, there was a golden flash, and giant swish of air that knocked Ed and Pat onto the ground. And Fred was gone.

"Holy cow!" Al said, running down the stairs. "Fred!"

"Yeah..." a dim voice called.

All three ran towards the voice, and found Fred lying on the ground.

"Got, got, the wind, knocked, out of me," he grunted.

"By what?" Pat demanded.

"Jesus."

"Jesus knocked the crap out of Fred?" Al asked.

"No, Jesus, I think that was a pendulum."

"Right. Someone built a big, friggin pendulum in the middle of-

"A house with a million doors leading to nowhere. Why not?"

"Wait, wait, guys," Pat said, "pendulums swing. Back and forth."

"AHHH!"

All four were on the ground, waiting for the strike that never came.

"Must be swinging a long ways," Al whispered.

"Why are you whispering?" Ed whispered back.

"I don't know."

"Ok, let's get back upstairs," Pat said. They helped Fred up and limped up the stairs. Suddenly, with his arms full of beer, Ed paused.

"Oh now what? Wait, let me guess, it's a friggin swinging cow," Al said.

"No. That painting. It looked at me."

Al approached the painting, which was large and evil looking. He held up a finger. The portrait was of a wrinkly old tyrant that resembled the latest King of England, who probably instituted use of the metric system. The eyes of the portrait followed Al's finger as it went back and forth, like a doctor checking for concussion.

"That's creepy," Pat said.

Staring at the portrait, all suddenly moved closer. He shaped his second and third fingers in a V and quickly poked the eyes of the portrait. The house shook, and shrieked, and quaked, throwing the four into a frenzied rush for the safety of the bedroom. There was a moan like a dying man, echoing from around the house. The walls shook and quivered, rattling paintings and draperies. A thundering boom crashed upon the inhabitants, who scurried like frightened field mice back into the room and huddled in the light.

"Why did you poke it?"

"Thought it'd be funny."

"Well the house didn't like it," Pat murmured. They slept in fear, trembling to an amber moon.

"Rise and shine boys."

Al opened the curtains and awoke the rest of the group, who all muttered death threats at the source of the light. It was still cloudy out.

"We can get out of this accursed house today," Al said, "but we got to get moving before another storm hits."

At the whispering hope of escape, the other three arose, eating a quick breakfast of beer and corn nuts. They quickly ran downstairs and towards the front door.

"It's still jammed!"

They quickly threw themselves at the door with all their available force, mostly consisting of corn nuts and frenzied desperation. It didn't budge.

"Now what."

"A window!"

They ran towards a large window facing out, where Pat saw the truck was still there, unharmed.

"Alright, I'm going to run at the window with this drape covering me, and burst through. When I go, you guys follow, okay?"

"Sure thing Al," Fred said nervously.

Al backed up, and wrapped himself in a purple drape, making him look like a misshapen grape with legs. The grape backed up and mumbled something, before running full speed towards the window.

"Now!" Fred yelled. It was the signal for Al the jump. And jump he did. But when he hit the window, there was a flash and the sound of water draining down a dirty pipe. The world around the house darkened as the three waited nervously. Less than half a minute later, the house burped and Al

d
r
o
p
p
e
d

from the dark ceiling and splatted, his drape folding around him. He now resembled a grape, bleeding its purple out.

"Oh ow."

"Oh jeez Al! You okay?"

"Do I LOOK OKAY!?!?!?"

"Yeah, you look fine."

"Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Oh God we're trapped!"

"Calm down Ed. There's a back door through the kitchen."

Fred helped Al up, and the group struggled towards the kitchen. Suddenly the lights went, and darkness embraced them all. They crouched by the kitchen cabinets. A deep roar gathered strength from within the house. It started as a harsh whisper, like a noise cast against a hurricane, swept away by a blink but still insidious in the recesses of the mind.

"Gettt....ouutttt..."

"Di-di-d-d-did you all hear that?" Fred whispered back.

"GETTTT.... OUTTT..."

Ed stood up in defiance.

"Make us you ugly...dirty, roach ridden, smelly, old rotting house!"

"OHHHHHKAAAYYYYY"

With that the house erupted in pounding, like a thousand fists on the floors, the ceiling, the cabinets. The house shuddered, and the roar was deafening. The four scrambled under shelves for cover, but the cabinets exploded in a blinding flash of silverware. Drawers opened and shook, knives and forks rattling. They then flew out and raked the group with sharp things. They smashed against the wall and windows. They didn't break the windows

though, only crashed into them with a deafening shriek. They hit the walls, sending chips and pieces of wall flying around.

"Quick, let's get upstairs!"

They began running, out of the doomed kitchen, into the chandelier room.

"Wait! Duck!"

At the top of the stairs a giant stuffed duck rolled down the stairs.

"Ahhh!!! Pendulum?"

"What?"

The Pendulum came by in a brilliant flash, barely missing Ed's face and sweeping by with a gust that sent the four reeling. They scrambled up the cursed stairs, which suddenly elongated.

"Not the Stairmaster!"

They huffed and puffed against the endless flight of stairs. The stairs suddenly stopped moving, but a whole set of ab rollers flew down the stairs, hitting Al and Pat and sending them toppling beyond view down the endless stairs. A giant picture of a watermelon flew down, but Ed quickly dodged it and kicked it hard once it was past him. It shattered, and at that moment the house stopped. Ed and Fred were flung against the wall, and Ed's last view was of a bearded man standing over them.

When he awoke, he was at the top of the stairs, surrounded by watermelon seeds. Fred was still out next to him. And three stairs down, Pat and Al were sitting, unconscious. Ed shook Fred a few times, but he did not respond. Suddenly, his eyes were drawn to the painting of the ancient old man he had poked. It was staring at him. Cold. He kicked Fred, until the repairman grunted and rolled over.

"Oh man. Is the house done PMS'ing now?"

"Yeah, think so."

"Good," Fred said, "Good." He rolled over again. Below, on the stairs Pat shuddered and awoke.

"Good. Very good!"

Al, now awake, looked around for the source of the voice, which boomed around the house. A bearded man appeared from around a corner at the top of the stairs.

"Very good! We'll do a few more takes and we're out of here."

"Who the hell are you?" Ed demanded.

"Why," the man replied, "I'm Steven Spielberg. Wow that last special effects job must have really knocked you out. Good work Michelle."

Michelle appeared from around a corner, followed by a large crew wielding cameras.

"Millions, we're going to make millions. And then I shall conquer Miramax, sweep the Oscars, and rule the world!

Mwahahaha!"

"Dude, what the hell are you talking about, you one-legged toothless idiot?"

Spielberg shot Ed a look.

"Aren't you Brad Pitt?"

"Do I **look** like Brad Pitt? I'm Ed."

"Oh NBC man eh. We'll take care of you too in due time."

"Hey wait now," Pat said.

"Tom!"

"What?"

"Tom Selleck?"

"I'm not Tom Selleck."

"Dude, man, I TOLD you," Fred whispered.

"If you're not Tom Selleck, who the hell are you, and what are you and your friend Ed doing on my god damn shoot?"

"For your information, whoever YOU are, my name is Pat, and I OWN this house."

The house shuddered.

"Well you stumbled onto the shoot of the most expensive, complicated, and glorious movie I have ever made."

"So you direct movies?" Ed asked.

"Yes you fool! I am Steven Spielberg! Mr. Cage, Mr. Travolta, didn't you recognize that these two bumbling idiots weren't on the cast?"

"Well," Cage began, "they knew their lines. They had that, fire inside! Good stuff, good stuff."

"They ruined everything! That one sequence cost fifty million dollars!"

"Not to mention the donuts," Travolta said, his mouth stuffed by his assistant with a jelly donut.

"Fools! All of you! I could have replaced you with Tom Hanks! Both of you!"

"Yeah," Cage said, "like he needs another Oscar."

"He may not, but I do," Spielberg shrieked.

"Hey, hey, you guys are all on my property. I guess it's okay if you shoot the movie, but I want five percent."

"Five percent!" screamed Spielberg.

"Hey I don't even get five percent," Travolta said, his mouth stuffed with another donut.

"You can't make me. I am the most powerful man in Hollywood, and I say that-hey what are you two staring at?"

"Duck."

It was a Yeti, to be more precise. And it picked up Spielberg and tossed him around like a doll. The house gave little squirming noises, like a cooing baby almost, as the Yeti, well, beat the crap out of a billion-dollar man. It's the way things go sometimes. Maybe, social tendencies decree that the poor men get the crap beaten out of them. Fate disagrees. Sometimes. Actually it follows a mathematical formula:

%Chance of NOT getting the crap beaten out of you =

(Strength) X (Fighting Prowess) X (Money)

(Stupidity)

You see, strength and fighting ability is obvious. But if you're rich, and not stupid, you hire bodyguards to protect you. In Spielberg's case:

$$(0.05) \quad X \quad (0.003) \quad X \quad (2,000,000,000)$$

$$(1,000,000,000)$$

= 0.0003 or 0.03%. So there's a 99.97% chance that

Spielberg would get the quack kicked out of him. It's bound to happen sooner or later. The surprising thing is that he got beat by a Yeti. After all, what's a Yeti doing in Texas? Seeking disorder of course. And following Ed and Pat in their truck. (Pretend that this Yeti runs really fast)

Ed and Pat lounged on the beach, a martini each one's right hand. They sat and watched the playful white waves tickle the golden beaches, stretching and retreating without tiring of its game. A few boats and surfers disappeared in the waves, little dots emerging from the deep blue crystal waters. A giant beach umbrella stretched above them. All around them, beautiful people shared the tranquil boredom. Pat scratched his sunburned forehead, and looked around for a waiter. The waiter to people ratio was about 5000 : 1. A small village served Ed alone. Mostly for martinis. Down the beach, a giant furry Yeti swam playfully in the waves. It's roar frightened off all but the bravest children, some of which were, in classic mythic tradition, picked up by the Yeti, given a resounding roar, a fresh whiff of fresh blood from the Yeti's mouth, and a ride down into the Pacific ocean with a giggle.

"You would think the...um...thing wouldn't like water. It's so...hairy," a woman was saying to Ed.

"We know that Yeti. I've seen it swim before."

"Really. That's interesting. Say weren't you in that new Spielberg film?"

"Sure was."

"You were brilliant. The fear, the courage, all so real! Unforgettable! ...I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

"Ed."

"Ah. Ed. So when did you meet the Yeti?"

"Oh that's a long story," Ed said with a smug smile. "It was when we were up in Michigan a while back. But again, that's a long, long story, too confusing to tell on such a nice day like this. What did you say your name was again?"

"Gwyneth."

"Ah, that's a beautiful name."

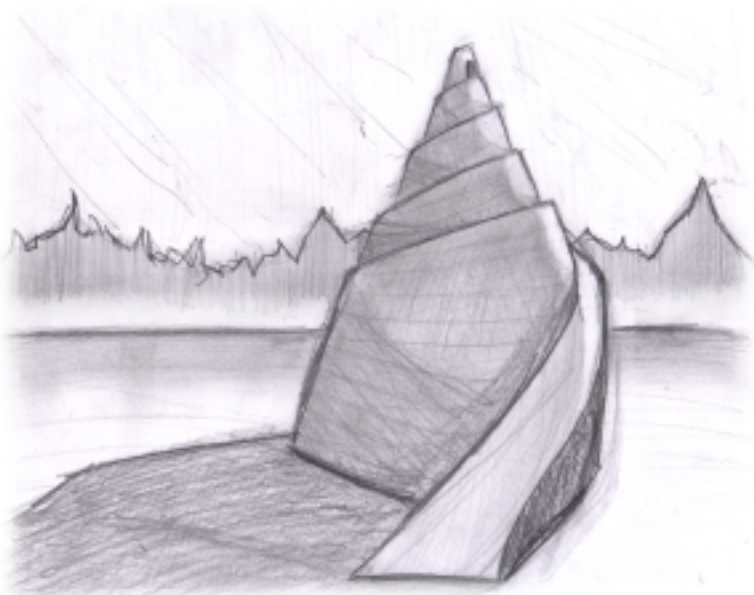
Disclaimer: Stairmaster and ab-roller are copyrights of their respective companies, as is Steven Spielberg. No harm was meant, as Mr. Spielberg is certainly one of the finest directors who has ever lived. In addition, no harm was meant in the inclusion of Mr. Cage and Mr. Travolta, both of whom are occasionally top-rate actors when not starring in Battlefield Earth or some crap like that, though I do not believe that they have yet to work with Mr. Spielberg; though I can imagine the brilliant results. The house is a reference to Mark Z Danielewski's brilliant novel [House of Leaves](#). Gwyneth refers to the lovely and talented Gwyneth Paltrow. All mathematical equations are fictional, though the rule of entropy does exist. Read about it further in a chemistry book. The show "Ed" is trademark of NBC and whatever giant corporation may own it currently.

Note from the Author: No harm is intended against the Church of Scientology. Only humor.

Note from the Editor: Removed: Eight pages insulting Texas, four detailing a scientific explanation of John Travolta's poor acting choice in Battlefield Earth, and an additional forty page memoir detailing the author's own desire to meet Gwyneth Paltrow on a sunny beach and watch a furry Yeti play in the waves like six-year old child. Corrected: Texas only has two syllables, not three, and Battlefield Earth was misspelled Battlefield Mearth. Also corrected, Steven Spielberg's stupidity rating was raised in accordance to trailers for the movie A.I.

Note from the Publisher: Texas is a state, as is New Mexico and occasionally Montana, Alaska, and Vermont.

Other Places, Other Times



In War

To Kayson, the music sounded all wrong. The strings screeched, the piano cracked, and they all flowed in the wrong direction. Everything moved so fast, and everything was so cold. He saw himself moving through the restaurant, sitting at the table, staring at his cold bland food. He saw his hands, purple in the freeze, and his water, frozen. Everything was blurred, everything was wrong. Even Renee, her beautiful, radiant face seemed masked with a cool complexion that seemed unnatural. It was like looking through the world through ice, and feeling the world through snow. Renee's smile, which he had fallen in love with, seemed small and sad, and her eyes sparkled in the cold. He loved her beyond comprehension, and could not understand what was wrong. He touched her hand, only to find it cold and unmoving, and when he bent to kiss her, she and the world seemed frozen. Her lips were blue, and when they

touched his, the world exploded around him, and the dream was shattered by the howling wind, driving blizzard, and the snow that had fallen around him.

Kayson awoke inside the building, 4 stories above Main St, in the clock tower. A gust of snow brushed off the last fragments of the dream, and he frowned at the scene below. All of Lexington was taken. His town. Destroyed. The bodies of his comrades, his *friends*, had been lined up along Main St, piled up in lines that stretched down the street. An example to those who resisted. Kay clutched the cold barrel of his rifle and let himself feel sorry for a few moments. He had tried his best to defend the town with his friends. But now the last civilians were retreating to the main harbor in Boston, and with them, Renee. She probably thought he was dead by now. The blizzard wiped the world clean, nature's final attempts to cleanse the bloodshed of the battle fought here, but it failed. Along Main St, the snow and ice mixed with the blood, and the streets ran with an unnatural crimson tide.

Below, at the entrance to the street, a commotion attracted Kay's attention. Lines of soldiers, the enemy which had ransacked Lexington, moved into the street. They surrounded a single jeep, which came into view in the form of a break in the storm. Kayson slowly loaded up his sniper's rifle, and muffled the sound of the barrel loading as he looked into the procession. In the jeep, 4 stars twinkled brightly in the storm. A general. Touring the town he had destroyed. Seeing what a single stroke of his pen could do. Kayson put the man, who waved to his men, in his sights. The crosshairs danced over the sparkling stars at his collar, and brushed over the 4 stars on his hat. Suddenly, from the back section of the jeep, a blur of blonde hair moved into the sight. Kayson eased up his hold on the trigger, for the jeep was moving slowly, and he had more opportunities. Below, he saw the general look down, and into the eyes of the young boy by his side. A child. A son. Of a general. Kayson watched as the general ruffled the boy's hair, and pointed out things at the side of the city. Kayson's town. The place they had destroyed. The general had raped the town, massacred the people, and was now parading it for his son. To grow up knowing that your father had killed so many, without even firing a gun. Yet, could he live knowing that his father

was shot, killed by the last surviving defender, while he watched inches away? Kayson watched the son smile as the boy pointed out burning objects in the distance. Inside of him, Kay felt the wrath and anger build, and boil. His town. His friends lying dead on the street.

The general and son got off the jeep, and stood awhile in the street, in Kayson's plain view. Standing and waving to the troops. Kayson put the general into his crosshairs, and closed his eyes. What would Renee say? He remembered the conversation they had before he left on the futile defense of this town. She had wanted him to go with her, away, to Europe, to safety. Kayson remembered saying that, in war, every soldier must make his own sacrifices. She understood, and for that he loved her. She simply nodded, bit her lip, and kissed him. She knew what must be done. In war every man must sacrifice some part of himself to save the rest. Kayson was now sacrificing his morals to satisfy the vengeance of his soul. To kill a man before his son, and to watch him bleed, and to cry, and to yell out to the world of his death, and wish death upon himself. Why is it that, in war, man does so terrible things?

Two bullets cried out from the clock tower. To vengeful rings of the rifle, and below on the street, silence, as soldier and son lay dead in a pool of blood, wrath, and the hateful vengeance of man.

Kayson slipped out quietly, and ran away from his town. He looked back only once to see his comrades dead on the street, the library burning, the soldiers crowded around the commotion. He would be followed quickly.

He reached Boston in a few hours, tired, hungry, and cold. The storm had not let up, and the snow fell all around him. There were lines of civilian refugees stretching towards the river. From one of the lines came a cry, his name, and a running figure. Renee ran up to him and embraced him, her worried eyes filled with the anguish of loss.

"Kay! Oh Kay, what happened..."

Kay looked away, and tried not to meet her eyes.

"We have to leave Kay! They are coming, the soldiers, to take away all of us. There are ships leaving, we can get on one! Kay..."

"Renee. Do you remember when we talked about man, and war. And how, in war, every soldier must sacrifice a piece of himself to save the rest? I have sacrificed too much Renee. I fear I am no longer human..."

"This isn't war Kay. You are not a soldier. Whatever you did, you did because you are human. That's all. In life, every man loses a part of himself. I don't want to lose you Kay. I want to stay here, in this moment, and hold you..."

Gunfire broke out behind the lines, as the soldiers moved in on the port. The crowds scattered, trampling each other as they moved towards the last boats. Kayson watched a child fall, heard her scream, followed by silence. Renee tugged at him, and Kayson looked down at his uniform, his gun, and looked up into the eyes he loved so much. A round of fire burst from around a corner, and Kayson fell grabbing his leg. Most of his calf was sheared off by the round of fire. Renee grabbed his arm, and dragged him to an alley.

"Renee...go. Get to the boats. Save yourself."

"No! I'm staying right here. I'm...not..."

As Renee stumbled, Kayson gently touched her cheek with a bloodied finger, and stroked her beautiful face, the face he loved so much. She tried not to cry, and simply held him.

"I'm staying...I can't...leave"

"Renee...in war, every soldier must...sacrifice...to live"

"This isn't war! No! I'm not a soldier! I don't want to fight, I just want to stay here!"

"No. This isn't war. It's life, and you must fight."

Kayson pushed her away. She stood up, a first tear shining through her eyes as she looked down at Kayson, as the life slowly pulsed out of him.

"Go!"

Renee looked at the harbor, and looked back into his eyes. She didn't want to let go of him. She didn't want to leave.

"Just close...your eyes, and you will hold me in your arms. Close your eyes love...go..."

Renee ran, and did not dare to look back.

The sun was warm on her back, and the birds chirped in the air. The gentle meadows swayed in the breeze, and butterflies danced through the wildflowers. The grass waved in slow formation, and a calm wind touched her hair, and set it flying. She sat in the chromatic fields, taking in the soft colors, and held Kay to her. Her eyes were closed, and she could see nothing, yet knew where she was. She felt the sun warm on her back. On the boat, a few people looked strangely, through the fog and dreary darkness of the ocean. Through the dark scene, with babies crying out in hunger, and the boat swaying, and people frowning, dirty, tired, there was a vision. A single woman on that boat, ordinary like the rest, as dirty and beaten as the rest, on the same dark foggy night, on the same dreary cold boat. She sat with her eyes closed, her face warm, and her gentle smile radiant.

The violins were perfect. The piano sparkled with crystalline notes through the warm summer air, as an open window provided the breeze that wafted through the restaurant, and into Kayson's nose. The brilliant scents of the delicate foods tickled his senses. Everything was light, even Renee. Her eyes smiled, and her lips shined, and he didn't know why he deserved such a person. Her hair danced briefly as a summer's gust passed over her, and the light shone perfectly on her face. She spoke, the words coming slowly, the scene slowing, everything happy. All Kay could hear was the rushing of blood through his head, the last murmur of life going through him, yet he knew she said I love you. He kissed her, and felt every last drop of life go through him at once, felt his soul rush from him to her, like two stars converging in the night sky. All the world seemed to stop, and linger in the moment of bliss. And in Kayson's mind, the music sounded perfect.

The Oracle of Verm

The source of all power brews from the infusion of that which is not normal upon human beings. Those beings who experience this power are changed forever. The source of the holy, hellish, and paranormal is still unknown, but to the people of the ancient kingdom of Atlantis, these concerns were of little relevance. The citizens of Atlantis shared a strange communal ignorance of the power they possessed, whether granted or found. The power had created the city, the city had created the people, yet the people created nothing. In this the lines between man and animal blurred and bent considerably. The folk of Atlantis sat like dumb animals, wallowing in the glory of their strength, the strength of singularity. Having been picked as the representative for a greater power no one else even had seen, the people of Atlantis felt a general deep rooted pride in not their accomplishments, knowledge, wealth, or power, but in their

birthright. It would not be surprising, in that case, that a single misinterpretation that no other civilization would have made led to their destruction.

Far from Atlantis lay the Oracles, shrines to gods and the power to forecast fate for man. Men and women traveled weeks and months to lay eyes on these glimmering stars of hope, to perhaps point the way for their lives. Some of these men and women were great leaders, kings, queens, warriors, scholars, who sought knowledge in its most brutal and essential form: prophesy. Others were commoners who sought to find the path they stumbled off of so many years ago. Yet still others went simply out of pure curiosity. It is those people who are usually the most surprised by the results.

Though many of the Oracles of the Gods were famous for their accuracy, many were also shams that charged money for false predictions. These Oracles still lay dependent on supernatural forces, but they let the prophecies come rarely, while the seekers came often. Perhaps the most obscure Oracle was an Oracle deep to the northland, at the base of the mountain of gods itself. A small, undecorated, not too glamorous temple of simple construction, served by quiet priests. The Oracle itself was strange in that it was not serviced by a God as most of the others, but simply worked. According to the normal superstition the Oracle at the base of Mount Olympus had never been wrong, but that it never meant what it said. Most agreed that the answers the Oracle there gave were so strange and obscure that they were not worth dealing with. That's why, with almost an entrenched avoidance, seekers of the truth generally strayed from the road leading to the Oracle of Verm.

It is strange then, that one man, from Atlantis, would come to seek the knowledge there. He was perhaps the wisest from Atlantis, for he knew that without outside information, something unexpected may happen to Atlantis. Thinking himself worthy and wise, he set off to the Oracle of Verm. His name was Lyrus.

Lyrus arrived at the small temple early in the morning, before the sun could spring over the crest to the east. He was not challenged as he entered, only looked upon strangely by the priests. The priests themselves seemed of an equally silent and efficient

manner, both serving their general purpose. They quickly showed him into a main chamber.

The chamber itself was cause enough for Lyrus to frown. Of the four walls, only three were manmade. The last faced east and was apparently engraved into a massive stone wall, which he realized was the base of Mount Olympus. From the base rose a single tree, which had shattered a hole into the ceiling, and was climbing up onto the mountain. He was told to wait.

It was while he was waiting that Lyrus felt an unusually strong displeasure from the room itself, almost as if the walls were pressing in. He wandered around the room, and finally settled beneath the tree, deciding to take a nap before the prophesizing priest arrived. Sleep came slowly, but strangely, accompanied by many memories. Most were of Lyrus' early life, as a scholar in Atlantis. Most considered him the greatest man alive, for he had cured disease, stopped hunger, and advanced Atlantis' power beyond any normal man's capabilities. Perhaps he was the greatest artisan and thinker alive. At least in Atlantis. He was the shining hope of Atlantis, the representation of all the dreams and aspirations of a power hungry proud people. Though he was not as vain as his city dwelling friends, he was still living in Atlantis. He had achieved more than any man could, he was powerful, respected, loved, admired. He was Atlantis.

While Lyrus was sleeping, the tree was climbing, physically moving, and arcing towards the bright sun of the noon day sun, which had since risen high into the sky. The tree brushed against Lyrus, and the words began.

Waking, Lyrus was startled by how quickly he came fully aware. Immediately he heard the voice, pouring from the hole in the ceiling, booming. His nerves shot awake and his ears strained to catch every word and inflection from the walls. Strangely, as the voice spoke, the tree shivered and writhed, and the sun seemed to glare brightly into the room, until the strange light blinded Lyrus.

"The light shall fall in the wrath of embers and sink to the bottom of the ocean of history."

That was all. Simple and deceptively short, the prophesy ended as quickly as it began. Lyrus was startled by its suddenness,

and wondered to himself whether or not he had missed the beginning. By the time he had copied down the sentence and left the temple, Lyrus was pretty sure that there was more to the Oracle of Verm than anyone had suspected. By the end of the month, Lyrus was nearing home, and sent word of his arrival.

The council of Atlantis met for the first time that month without Lyrus. The meeting was to discuss the attack on Athens which the men of the Atlantis council had so desired. The Athenians were the only match to the island of Atlantis. Athens had technology, art, beauty almost unrivaled in the known world. Almost. But the council decided that destroying Athens would serve a twin purpose, not only eliminating a rival but showing the rest of the world the true power of Atlantis.

So it was decided that the machine would be used on Athens. The machine was the triumph of the ignorant pride filled hearts of Atlantis. It brought up the fire from the earth itself to engulf anything. It could and would destroy Athens.

Then suddenly came the message from Lyrus, the well respected scholar of Atlantis. It was a simple sentence followed by a promise to be home within the next week. "The light shall fall in the wrath of embers and sink to the bottom of the ocean of history." The council members saw this as only an affirmation of their sure victory, and proceeded as planned. Athens was the jewel of the western world, a so called shining beacon of light. Surely this is the light prophesized, they reasoned. The councilmen figured that after they destroyed Athens, it would be Atlantis that would be jewel of the world. The jealousy burned within them like the ironic fire from the forge of the machine sent to burn Athens. Soon, they thought, Athens would be burnt to the ground, and be remembered only in a distant history book.

Lyrus was a scholar for as long as anyone could remember. His writings and research was always for the good of Atlantis. Many of the advances in medicine and energy were thanks to his theories, and of course the given power of Atlantis. The island itself seemed brighter because of him, and his intellect radiated the light of truth. The people of Atlantis looked up to him as a holy savior, another of the signs sent from the bright heavens to ease their mortality. And

he had. So it was with much surprise that Lyrus found himself suddenly doubting the prophecy, and rushing home to Atlantis as fast as he could.

The machine whirred and groaned, and the earth moaned and shook, and the fires erupted forth. The council members could not contain their glee as the fire swirled round and round the temple of the council. Victory, surely, must be at hand. Ironically enough, only miles away Lyrus had run, out of breath to the top of a cliff overlooking the island of Atlantis. The sun was setting, and with a lucid horror Lyrus saw the twinkling of the fading sunlight pour through the city. The sunset lit up the city in a brisk red and lavender, like a brilliant display. It was the horror of realization for Lyrus, the sudden and painful realization that the light spoken of in the prophecy was not Athens, but Atlantis. It was then that the machine simply stopped. All was silent for three seconds as time ground to a halt, and the world shattered. Then everything roared back in a massive wave of sound, light, and fire. The machine which was too have sealed Atlantis' place in the great world did just that, and collapsed in on itself. The fire of the earth which had been so delicately controlled smashed into the ground, engulfing the city in screams of the all too mortal denizens of Atlantis. For those who had forsaken the earth, revenge was at hand, as the fire tore apart the island, and lava poured from ever crevice, and the ground itself evaporated.

On the cliff above, Lyrus was too stunned to make sense of the matter, only knowing that he had been wrong, and the prophecy was that of doom not victory. Indeed, the light burned quite brightly, and the city rumbled as the earth claimed pious vengeance against the city and people which had failed to respect the laws of nature and the holy mother of earth. As Lyrus watched the city sink out of view, he thought that the end was at hand. He thought the prophecy was fulfilled.

It was only later, when the shockwave of the sinking island hit the nearby shorelines, did the prophecy truly come to bear. As the cliffs shook, a sad and tired Lyrus lost his footing, and tumbled to his death into the fiery cataclysm of the earth opening up on the shoreline as the tremors tore open a gaping chasm of fire and

brimstone into the ground. The light had been extinguished. One of the greatest philosophers, thinkers, and scholars ever had been destroyed by his nation's blind ignorance, and his works had disappeared. It was Lyrus' final thought that he had never before been so wrong in judgement, in that it was Lyrus that the prophecy referred to, not the city in general. Now he would die in the fiery womb of the earth to be consumed by his failing sight of the real world around him. Sadly, he knew the seclusion of the island of Atlantis would ensure that he would be forgotten. He was the light of Atlantis, and as the Oracle of Verm had predicted, he had fallen in the wrath of embers, and sunken to the bottom of the ocean of history.

The Rain

Sometime in earth's future, things have changed. The wonders of man's millennia of civilization have been erased. Creatures of the planet found only extinction. New creatures adapted to the new world, but earth's most cunning creature is still in hiding. Most of the historians believe it was war. The way the earth was scorched, most knew it could only be by Old World weaponry. During the destruction, humanity returned to a more primal state without their glorious technology. Years later, the remains of mankind emerged from their hiding to look upon the new world. What they found will forever alter humanity's future.

Mavin looked out the window, and almost missed the Stranger. He walked by the crowded streets. The explorer everyone knew yet no one understood. He had been everywhere, the rumors whispered, and he would take you anywhere in the world, for a price.

They whispered that he was fearless, and would venture anywhere, which was exactly what Mavin needed right now. He scrambled up from his chair, and ran down the dark halls of the University. His old form limped into the streets of the city of Darklin. The streets were still dirty, and still smelled, yet Mavin was hopeful. By the time he caught up with the nameless explorer, Mavin was breathless. He tapped the Stranger on the shoulder, and watched the rugged form turn around to face him. The Stranger raised a brow, and waited for the old historian to catch his breath.

"I need your help," Mavin gasped.

"Not here." The Stranger motioned at a tavern at the end of the street, and they quietly slipped into a dark back booth. The Stranger looked irritated.

"What?"

"I have a proposition," Mavin gasped out.

"Speak quickly."

"The University believes that there is still some Old technology left. Libraries of it are still in existence. With these books we could rebuild humanity. We at the University need to find these books before some traveler stumbles on it."

"What's the catch?"

"Catch?"

"Why do you need me for?"

"Oh. Uh the library is sorta in the ruins."

The stranger's eyes widened as he slumped back in thought. The ruins were the remains of the Old cities, huge and amazing to behold. There were rumors that the ruins were haunted, and that everyone that went that direction never came back. Most agreed that even the Stranger didn't go to the ruins. For most, they were just a menacing shadow on the horizon.

"The ruins eh...what's my..motive?"

Mavin was surprised at how calm the Stranger was. He took out a pouch of money, and spread the contents for the Stranger. He slipped the money into a pocket and looked deep into the old man's eyes.

"You're alone aren't you? You are the only one that believes that the library exists."

Mavin looked on, and the air rang with silence. The Stranger looked back, and motioned to the door.

They floated down the great river, towards the shadows on the horizon. The days were uneventful, and the Stranger knew his way well. Soon the shadows loomed in front of them, and details became clear. They docked their little raft, lit a lantern and ventured into the city. As if on cue, the rain began to pour, and the clouds moved to darken the city. Mavin struggled to keep the small lantern flame going. The Stranger looked out past the patter of the rain and deep into the city. He blinked, and wondered if those were just two red slits peering at him from the shadows. He shook his head and the slits were gone. He turned, and watched the lantern wink out. Mavin cursed and struggled to re-light it. The Stranger warily looked around. Two dark red slits stared back at him. The Stranger's eyes widened as he grabbed the old man and took cover. He drew a dagger and struggled to get up. He stood as the wind rushed past him. A rhythmic booming filled the air. The Stranger stood against the wind, the rain, and the city. Mavin huddled in the corner and waited for the end.

The city parted for the machine. Giant legs propelled the metal beast through the walls of rains.

Red slits narrowed, and looked upon the two ragged human forms in the corner.

The Stranger gawked and the hulking machine. The beast swung an arm and the surprised Stranger couldn't react. There was a crash as the Stranger flew into a pile of gray metal. The city groaned as the machine turned on Mavin. The old man's eyes widened and his mouth opened to cry out. A sickening crunch filled the air as a steel appendage slammed into Mavin's ribcage. The Stranger watched the historian's lifeless form fly into a back alley. He got up and began running. His legs couldn't react, yet he still limped on. He heard the metallic groaning behind him, and could almost feel the machine breathing down his back. He heard the city fly apart behind him, and felt shrapnel pepper his back. The world flew apart, and his vision stained red. He felt the blistering heat as a beam of light shattered the building next to him. He tripped and slid along the cold ground. He looked up into the rain and saw nothing.

The Stranger didn't remember much of his childhood. The curtains of his memories opened to reveal a lush landscape of gently waving grass. Small knolls dotted the terrain, and the occasional grove of oak and wispy weeping willows. The land opened to the Great River, which flowed and ebbed behind him. He looked up at the glaring sun, and into his father's face. His father always seemed to him the wisest man alive. The Stranger loved these trips, sailing away the Great River with his father. He loved sleeping under the stars, and catching his own fish for meals. Most of all though, he loved his father's stories. His stories always told of the past. Humanity had gone down the wrong course, but had been given a second chance. Being just a boy, the Stranger never really understood what his father meant until later. By that time, his father was gone, and he sailed the Great River alone. He set out to see this new world for himself. The sun sparkled on the gentle surface of the waters of the River he sailed. He went everywhere, yet nothing was the same. He saw this new world with new eyes, and he wasn't sure what he saw. His father could no longer answer his questions about life, and he realized that the years of wandering this world had done him nothing. Instead, he found himself wandering the cities of humanities return, looking for work. He still didn't know what he was going to do with his life when he had found himself wandering the streets of Darklin.

They raced through the forests, ignorant of the thin branches snapping against them. Occasionally they glanced at the bloody form in the stretcher who was mumbling nonsense. They packed on more cloth as the form continued to bleed. The forest did not part for them, so they had no choice but to crash through the trees. The city was just a little farther.

He woke up to that dreadful crashing beat. He didn't know if it was in his mind, or if that dreadful machine was still there. He looked down and gaped at the continuous wound that was his body. Every imaginable wound was there as the forest rushed by. Up ahead, the all too familiar city of Darklin came up. He thought about Mavin, but all he could think about was that rhythmic crashing.

The door burst open and Staedler looked up at the forms in the door. The thought came back that he might want to go to sleep. He looked back up at the two figures laying down a stretcher. Oh a stretcher. He looked at the doorway to his small healer's shop. The figures in the doorway were waiting, staring at him to do something. The older man's grizzled face showed a stoic blank. The younger girl's eyes were urging him on, almost desperate. Staedler thought for a second, and wondered where his medical supplies were. It would be another long night.

The three watched over the Stranger. A few onlookers stopped in, wondering how the famous explorer wound up in a healer's shop in the inner city. The Stranger struggle to stay alive the first week. By the second week his condition had stabilized, and the two rescuers left for the city. The third week, the Stranger asked for water. From then on his condition returned to normal.

The Stranger sat up, and looked around the tiny cottage where he was. He had thought that this was Darklin city, but it looked like the country. The room wasn't empty, there was a hunched old man standing in the corner. For a fleeting moment, the Stranger thought that it was Mavin, alive and well. The figure turned, revealing an older, different man.

"Ah so you're up."

The old man introduced himself as Staedler, a healer in Darklin. The Stranger expressed his gratitude to him, then asked how he was found.

"Why don't you ask them?"

Staedler pointed to the pair of figures in the doorway. Either they had just came in or the Stranger had missed them when he looked around. The girl introduced herself as Rhea, and the man as Rubin. They had found his form drifting down the Great River, clinging to a piece of driftwood. Seeing his injuries, they had brought him to Staedler. The old healer nodded in agreement, then asked the Stranger what he was doing that close to the cities. As the Stranger began to tell his tale, the eyes of the listeners widened. Old technology was priceless, and to know how to make something from

the Old world was preposterous. When he was done talking, the two rescuers went off in the corner to talk, shooting an occasional glance at the Stranger. Staedler tried to get more details out of the Stranger, exact locations and dangers. Rhea and Rubin came back, and just asked one more question.

"What happened back there that would cause you to leave? You only said that something chased you at, never what that something was." The Stranger was silent.

"I told you, something attacked Mavin, so I ran." After more talking, Rubin spoke up.

"We want to go back."

"We? I'm not going back again."

"You're the only one who knows where the Library is."

"If there is a Library."

"We're going with or without you. The technology we bring back could save mankind."

"Or it could destroy it." Rubin looked surprised, and started for the door.

"Wait," the Stranger said. "I guess I could help you out."

Rhea smiled and looked up at Staedler. The old man gave a sigh.

"Nothing better to do."

The raft docked against the dark city. To the Stranger, it was too familiar. The rain had been falling nonstop for the past day, and the clouds created an artificial night. The city was a collection of shadows, cloaked by the darkness that covered many secrets. Rubin and the Stranger lit lanterns, and Staedler whistled deeply in appreciation for the dark magnificence of the city. The Stranger led the way, weaving through the maze of the city, remembering what Mavin had gone. They had come so close the other time. The city stood above them, endless rows of faceless buildings. Up ahead a short building stood against the rain.

"That's it," the Stranger said.

They moved into the building, to find it remarkably well protected from the elements. The entire group was soaked, and they

were all tired. They moved through dark hallways, and rows of wooden shelves. They agreed to split up and look around. Rubin and Staedler moved off to the left, and left the Stranger and Rhea in the middle of a dark passage. The stranger held up the lantern to a row of books. Rhea's eyes lit up. These books weren't handwritten, and were still intact. She held up a fat heavy book, and slurred out a title.

"Great...Expectations. Looks boring."

She put down the book and looked around. Everywhere there were books. Books on people, places and things. The Stranger was silent as he sifted through the rows of books. He held up a heavy book, and proudly displayed it like a trophy. They read together the contents. There were formulas for amazing chemicals, instructions for incredible machines. All just sitting waiting for someone to claim. Suddenly he heard Staedler cry out in the distance, and a muffled crash. The Stranger and Rhea ran toward the direction of the cry, unaware that they were knocking over priceless books. They found Rubin in a corner, loading books into a bag. Staedler was on the floor next to him, looking dazed.

"What are you doing?" Rhea cried.

"I'm going to bring these back. Come on Rhea, we don't need these two."

The Stranger made a move to grab Staedler, but Rubin grabbed him first. The Stranger moved back slowly. In the distance, thunder boomed. The Stranger eyed Rubin, who was loading more books into the bag.

"I'm going to be a hero, once they see I brought back the glorious Old world technology!"

The thunder boomed again. The Stranger stopped and listened closely. That wasn't thunder. It was like a rhythmic crashing.

The city parted, and the machine hunted. It had seen four figures earlier, and knew they were still in its city. The red slits narrowed.

The Stranger motioned Rhea to back up slowly. Staedler, still looking dizzy, started to get up. Rubin had finished loading his bag, and looked at the two.

"Fine I see Rhea. This guy's lost all touch with civilization. He's a loner, he'll help only if he gets enough money. Let him live his own dream world. I'm leaving."

"Don't do this." Rhea moved closer. Rubin drew and short knife and waved it at Staedler. Rhea backed off a little.

"All my life being a nobody. All that is going to change. I get the last laugh."

He turned, and the wall in front of him exploded. They all flew back as the giant form of the machine filled the crevice in the wall. The Stranger took the chance to grab back Staedler. Rubin turned around and faced the giant machine with a gaping expression. It raised a steel fist and swept Rubin aside into the rubble of the city. The Stranger looked beyond the machine, at a crater in the ground. It just might be deep enough. He leaped up and charged at the machine, dodging a flying fist. He ran under its legs, and onto the edge of the crater, waving his arms and yelling at the machine. It creaked as it turned, and faced the Stranger. It moved towards him, faster and faster, until it was almost running. The ground shook as the machine lunged at the Stranger. He dodged, and as the machine swung again he jumped deeper into the crater. The machine stumbled forward, tripping on the edge of the crater. It wobbled and lost its balance, falling forward, filling the crater with its metallic parts. Rhea cried out, but the Stranger was already buried deep under the wreckage. Staedler, got to his feet, as Rhea supported him. Rhea started towards the crater, but Staedler stopped her.

"I don't understand," Rhea said.

"I think that weren't not ready."

"Ready for what?"

"For what was given to us," Staedler said. "The technology we are looking for destroyed an entire world. I don't think we're ready to wield such power again. Yet..."

"Oh." Rhea looked around, and began to cry. The world seemed to crush in on the two, huddling in the broken library, looking around at the empty gray around them. The rain still didn't stop, and the clouds still didn't part. As Rhea helped Staedler to his feet, she noticed the books all around her. She started to pick one up, but

stopped herself. Staedler looked on silently, shaking his head. The Stranger had led a life of solitude, away from humanity. Rubin had only wanted to bring back to knowledge to mankind. Yet neither of them were really right. They both represented what humanity had done to itself. Rhea and Staedler knew that someday people would understand the responsibilities. They got up, and went back to civilization. And the rain stopped.

A Vignette of Peace

For me at least, the war ended after Sherbrooke. The war had been short and sweet for me, though those enemies and comrades I had left behind lay broken and lifeless in an all too long forever. Sherbrooke was our last objective, a town which I later discovered had no military complexes or supplies. There was no army in Sherbrooke, only civilians. That day we left an entire virgin town broken, lifeless and raped behind in the hot fog and smoke. We left the town burned down to the ground, the last embers and spires testaments to some horrible tragedy I could never forgive. For me, the war ended after Sherbrooke. For those I left behind, the war would never end.

I returned to my home, Lexington, a stark simile of Sherbrooke. It was an age of peace, they declared upon our arrival home. It was an age where we were done fighting, and could return

to our homes and families. I returned home to my small but comfortable one story house on the corner of two streets named after trees. It was summer when our division returned home, and the flowers were just beginning to bloom all around us. Up north, I sat for weeks without end in cold lifeless trenches where everything and everyone simply melted into the mud and gray. At home, I sat on my back porch and watched the flowers sway gently in the breeze, and hoped to forget those lifeless colors I had left behind.

Sometimes, Renee would creep up quietly behind me and lay a hand on my shoulder, as if she could pretend for just a few moments to understand and feel my sorrow. Other times she would sit down next to me and let me hold onto her, watching the butterflies make warm patterns in the sky. While she looked into my eyes, I sometimes saw her frown, and look on my face as if scouring a puzzle for a missing piece. I wondered too, sometimes, how much I left behind.

The dreams came from the first night I returned home. While sitting in the trenches or musty buildings, I would never dream. I wished I had dreamed, wonderful soaring dreams of home and things I had left behind. Yet I never dreamed. I asked my comrades a few times whether or not they dreamed. Most gave a far away look and turned and left without a word. A few shared their dreams with the rest, silly dreams about beaches filled with women they had seen in some picture or walking through some forest they had not seen since they were children. Those shared dreams felt like everyone's. I never had any dreams to contribute.

I often dreamt of my first real kill. I had killed before, but always little dots in my scope. I would focus in and out, get a bead, and fire. The dot would collapse in a pillow of red, but it never had a face or a voice. I was always too far away. One day, while I was hiding in a warehouse, a guard accidentally stumbled upon me. He came to the room I was in to smoke in the open air by the windows. I was told the entire complex was abandoned, and was surprised when he went in. He and I looked at each other for the longest time, and right before I shot him I had a terrible vision of his paralyzed eyes in my head. He was barely reaching for his sidearm when my bullet went through his head, right between those two brilliant eyes.

They glazed over, and I had to sit the rest of the night sleeping in that cold room, where the temperature froze the blood like a crimson carpet spread under me. I had to leave the next morning before they found the guard had not returned from his night patrol. I left him without a thought.

When I had this dream not even Renee with all her wordless wisdom could comfort me. Stan, my comrade, could, for he had seen things like me. I told him about the dreams, and he said that he, too, was scarred by the war. Only he would have a mere one dream, that repeated over and over. We sat down to talk about it over a beer at Mac's Bar.

"I always dream about one moment," Stan said, "where the world stopped outside of a building in Sherbrooke. Supposedly there were militants with arms inside, waiting for us. I was cold all over and shaking, but I burst in and without further thought shot everyone inside. There were three women and a child lying on the floor afterwards. They get their revenge now Kay, they are avenged now."

Stan sipped his beer quietly after that. I always respected Stan for the way he carried the world, as if it was without burden or problem. I knew it troubled him inside, but he never let it show. I had never seen Stan cry, even if he was wounded he would just grit his teeth and go on. Stan had kids though, and I thought he found a way around the pain.

Of course, the summer went by peacefully enough. I got better, and the stiffness that plagued my joints lifted with the warm summer air. I enjoyed having Renee around the house, it made me feel like I owed it to someone or something to come back. I wondered sometimes that if there was no one home waiting for me, whether I would have tried to survive in that hell. Stan had a reason to go home, I suppose.

I met Renee at the start of college. It was no romantic love at first sight, but I did feel like she was really someone I could trust. We did not get involved until one dreamy summer's eve, when fireworks played in the night sky and we sat on top of our neighbor's roof, smelling the barbecue in the lawn below. She let her head fall upon my shoulder and in that one instant all my dreams and hopes

were altered like a river flowing around a rock. She became the vision of everything I had ever wanted, and I became her vision. She became the foundation of everything I had, the only reason for my existence. Only then did I really think I loved her.

For a while, things seemed good in a life too good to be lived. We happily lived among shady trees and warm days, glistening snow and spring thaws. When the war came I knew that my too good of a life was about to end. Which it did.

So that summer myself, Jerry Pratt and Stanley Lowe under the direction of General Stark all marched out, headed north to some invisible dot on a map. We burnt that dot, and the next, and stopped for the winter in cold muddy trenches where nothing lived and even hope smoldered in despair. When the winter ended we would march out again. I hated fighting, especially in close quarters where I could see the expression of those about to die. Never once did I have some glorifying dream of war, for those who did often did not come home. The only war objective I had was to survive and return home. Jerry and Stan felt the exact same way. We all had families by then. Jerry was married, Stan's wife was pregnant, and the night before I left, I placed a ring under Renee's pillow.

By the time we came to Sherbrooke, Stark had set me up as a sniper. It came at my own request, but Stark was glad to fill that particular slot. I found I was a little too good at picking off people in the distance. Yet I was happy for never having to see them die. At Sherbrooke I did my job without thought. We all succeeded, for by the summer of that year we were all at home comfortably, with nothing of our military uniforms but the specters of the corpses we left rotting in the earth.

Two months after our return, Renee proposed that Stan, Jerry and I all get together. We had almost never seen each other since returning home, and never all three. Each time I looked at one of them I saw someone skinny, tired, and broken, like a dim reflection of myself. Yet by that time they seemed better, and for the first time in almost a year I thought that maybe my life could have a verisimilitude of peace.

We sat in at a local restaurant, all five of us. Stan worried perpetually about his son, but the babysitter eventually stopped answering his questions, and he in turn stopped asking the questions. Jerry told us that his wife was on vacation in Michigan. For half an hour we sat and chatted about everything but the war. Any topic that might have led to a discussion about the war was shot down instantly. Eventually, our food came and we ate in virtual silence. I sat with Renee and hoped that no one would bring up the war. And for half an hour it felt like there was no war. But things were never like that for me, and within minutes the terrible memories would come and go.

It was during one of these moments that I felt the need to escape, and I quickly left to use the restroom in some quickly contrived excuse. When I returned there was a buzz of commotion around the tables, and a small crowd had gathered around my table. I shoved my way through and found myself in the eye of the storm, where my five friends were seated all very quietly with their hands on the table, looking in. All around them, military police dressed in combat uniform stood at attention as a single woman, proud and handsome stood over Jeremy Pratt.

"Lieutenant Jeremy S. Pratt, you are hereby under arrest by order-" she began. Immediately a general protest cut her off. The wave of protest from the audience were cut off by the guards, who turned and quickly bulldozed the front row down.

"Why is he being arrested?" I asked.

"Lieutenant Jeremy S. Pratt, you are under arrest by order of the Lexington Military Tribunal."

This time no one protested and one MP stood Jerry up and handcuffed him.

"Wh-what is this for?"

"Please follow me," the woman said, as if Jerry had a choice. I scrambled after him, brushing past Renee.

"Renee, go home I'll get this sorted out. Everything will be ok."

"Kay, don't get involved. Helping Jerry is one thing, but don't sacrifice yourself for the sake of heroism."

"Never have, never will," I replied with a smile. I kissed her briefly before she left, and her lips lit up the room and made me feel dizzy. She then followed my request and walked off.

To my left I saw that Stan was making a similar request. We then quickly followed the trail of MP's and excitement that snaked around the restaurant. We finally caught up with the woman.

"Excuse me," I said, "Ms?"

"Trenelli."

"Yes, Ms. Trenelli I-"

"Lieutenant Colonel Trenelli."

"Why is Mr. Pratt being arrested?"

"Are you family?"

"No," Stan replied, "but we would like to know why you guys are dragging him off at this foul hour." She narrowed her eyes for a bit and then straightened.

"My orders were to retrieve Lieutenant Pratt for questioning. If you would like, you may accompany us," she said. The last sentence was choked out.

"Where?" I asked.

She gave complicated directions to the base I already knew of, and then whirled about in her shiny military shoes and promptly disappeared around a corner. Stan and I glanced at each other.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well what?"

"What do we do?"

"Follow them, that's for sure. They probably just screwed up, got the wrong man."

I followed Stan to his car. We climbed in and Stan drove the way to the base, which both of us had trained in. Memories were flooding back in.

Events had almost followed the same pattern as they had two years ago, when Stan, Jerry and I were all green heroes with no aspirations but coming home. We left behind then an entire world, and while we went and fought and changed, home stayed the same. When we all returned, we had changed too much and the rest of the world was new. For our reborn eyes, the lovely vision of the past had disintegrated into an alien terrace. We hated it.

When we arrived the gate was empty and locked, but when Stan honked the horn of the car a single tired looking guard waved us in. Either he knew us or didn't care, for we rolled onto the grounds, and stopped at the holding complex, which was a refined neologism for a jail. Stan and I walked quietly through dew stained grass up to the front door, and without knocking opened it.

Trenelli was sitting at the end of a long room by a table consulting with another officer who had his back turned to us. She looked up when we came in. Past her, through the door, we caught the flash of movement.

"Guards," she said, catching my eyes. At that moment the other officer turned around. It was General Stark.

"Ah hello Stan, Kay." Trenelli shot him a look. "Yes, well Lowe, Morson, come in. Trenelli you know Stanley Lowe and Kayson Morson, I presume," Stark said, smiling.

"Why is Jerry being held?" Stan quickly demanded.

"Ah, well, he's been charged with-

"Treason." Trenelli finished. Stark looked indignant, but Trenelli ignored the look.

"Treason? Your joking right," I said.

"I'm sorry Kay, but it isn't coming from us. High command has information that-

"Lies! Why the hell would Jerry betray everything he has?"

"Lieutenant Pratt fought in a bitter war, he may harbor resentment against high command," Trenelli said, calm as day.

"Let us talk to him, I'm sure there is a logical explanation."

"I'm sorry to say the logical explanation in this case, Kay, is the explanation put up by command," Stark replied. He pushed forward a report to Stan and I. Trenelli shot him another look.

"Sir, if I may this-

"I'm sorry Colonel you may not. You are dismissed." Trenelli skulked away from the triumphant Stark.

"Let me read this Kay, you go talk to Jerry."

Stark nodded and went to the door, bringing in a pair of armed guards who led me to a dark cell. Jerry lay on his cot with his arm on his forehead. I thought he was asleep.

"Come to torture me?" he said.

"It's me Jerry," I replied. He sat up at once and looked at me in the dim. The guards stayed put.

"You may leave."

"We have orders to accompany any visitors at all times."

"You will leave."

With a quick glance at each other, the guards settled to retreating down the hall, still within view.

"Kay, Kay, why am I here?"

"You are being charged with treason."

"I know, I know. Why am I here?"

"Don't worry, we will get you out. This place is no home for you, we will get you transferred to house arrest and get this entire thing settled."

Pratt put his hands on his face.

"You don't deserve this. I'll get you out."

"Please Kay. I need to get out. I didn't do this, I need to get out. My wife, she'll be back soon and if she sees me like—"

"I'll get you out Jerry. I believe you, I trust you. I'll get you out."

Kay turned around and walked back. The guards let him through the door, where Stan was seated facing the general.

"But he's not dangerous!"

"Any criminal is dangerous. Now that he's spent time in jail, how do you think he feels against us?"

"Dammit General you know he doesn't hate us."

I chimed in.

"Jerry Pratt is depressed, and wants to go home. I say you let him, place him under house arrest, and investigate the matter thoroughly."

"Kay," Stan began, "Jerry is being charged with treason. They say he gave information to—"

"Alright gentlemen I think that's enough," Stark said.

"But Jerry?"

"I will arrange for him to be moved to house arrest, but under the constant watch of no less than a dozen MP's. And if anything happens to him, I will hold you two personally responsible."

With that, we were dismissed. I went home.

Home was a notion I had grown to love. During the first major battle against the 'reds we charged in a foolish motion across two miles of barren wasteland, losing only half of our division and taking a mighty shack. In terms of men, it only cost us a mere eighty men per meter of ground gained. The general in command was dismissed. Stark took command, and took myself, Jerry and Stan all under his wing. We became officers, leaders, and led our men into "better" battles. We never lost a battle after Stark took command, but he always argued that we never really won a battle either.

The first battle under Stark was one of those that we never won. We took position on a small cliff, digging bunkers and trenches and clinging to our spots like grease to fabric. They found us and charged, all day and all night. We killed ourselves, tired ourselves, and began to lose the will to fight. Waves of human masses flung themselves upon us until we became more concerned about using ammunition than missing the targets. Yet, the tactics worked for three days later, we were all tired from little sleep and our own shells exploding outside every day and night. We had not stopped fighting, and outside a wall of human death was pinning us in. Finally Stark ordered a strategic maneuver, and we circled around the remainder of their army and destroyed it. We left then, leaving no less than ten thousand men lying on the ground bloodied. They had found us, fought us, and left more than two thousand of our boys and girls and men and women rotting in damp earth. I find it hard to imagine that number in terms of people. I doubt I know two thousand people, so I sometimes imagine everyone I know, and some I don't, cut down at the spot. When we returned to that spot on the way home, it was empty and nothing grew, and the local population called it the void. Nothing would grow, no animals would cross, and humans were instantly possessed by the stench of blood and useless slaughter, which drove a maddening wind into the heads of those who lingered.

It was even worse at the border, before we crossed our lines and went home and were warm and safe in the arms of our loved ones. A truck carrying troops hit a land mine and went rolling into a ditch in four different pieces. It occurred up the road from us and at the same time almost a single infantry hit another landmine and died.

The troops from the truck landed, some alive, while the single infantry was dispersed on the four winds. We froze in our tracks. Officers yelled out orders, "nobody move!" And nobody did, for we were in a minefield and moving meant dying. So we stood, sitting there, listening to the cries of those from the truck. Some screamed heroically, some moaned, others moved but were silent. There was one soldier with a leg stuck under a piece of the truck and he would not stop wailing. We still did not move, but everything human inside me willed me to step forward and help them. But everything human inside me willed me back, willed me to live and return home to the arms of my loved one, arms that those men would never see. We did not move.

After some time the screaming stopped and the moaning went up even more, and from the back we heard that a minesweeper team was moving up to our position from the west. So we waited. I had stood for several hours, and felt like dying. Some of the men, especially those closest to where the truck had landed, were crying, sobbing like little children, crying to go home. We were close then, six miles at the most, and those in the truck would never cross and go home. No one ran to them, everyone had their own arms to love. Finally no one was left alive from the truck except, by some cruel act of fate, the man pinned beneath the truck, his leg no longer twitching and he did nothing but cry and cry. He would not pass out, he would not die, and yet we saw him being wrenched apart by pain and suffering. I yelled out bravely to be heroic, live, I said, and I asked the nearest officer when the minesweeper team was coming. He said that the team was bogged up in mud, and would be another hour. A man from the back, a medic, replied that the man would never live an hour. The whole time the man could not stop screaming, as if his torture had filled him with endless breath that would not expire. "Stop it! Oh God stop it, Jesus kill me. Just shoot me dammit oh God!"

"Kay," an officer said, "can you hit him?"

"What?" I replied.

"Can you, can you shoot him from here?"

"What!"

"Can't stand to hear him like that."

The man wailed again.

"Can you hit him from here Kay? Cleanly? Quick, you know?"

"Oh, I-"

"Kay listen to him."

He screamed again.

"We'll never reach him in time Kay. Please."

I took out my gun and shot him, a single bullet through his brain that, I hope to God, killed him instantly. And from the men no one cried except for the medic. Ten minutes later the minesweeper team arrived, and declared that the mine the truck hit was a fluke. There were no other mines. We marched on and left the truck in the ditch, and left the men there too. Down the troop column no one bothered to retrieve the men, and to my knowledge they lie there still, all except for the man who I shot; that man followed me home and haunted me until I could not stop screaming like he.

That man haunted me, and he appeared in my dreams over and over at home in Lexington. Renee told me to forget it, that I did what I thought was right. She was always stronger than I, more capable of this infinite moral strength that made her invincible and beautiful in my eyes. For me I retained this image during the entire northern front of her eyes and face before I kissed her and bonded her image with my salvation and hope. I carried that image with me north. Sometimes Jerry would ask me why I had no pictures of Renee, or my family, or friends. I would simply close my eyes and see her face, and tap my temple wordlessly. Jerry understood after a while, but still carried his wife on paper in a locket hanging on his neck.

My last day of peace came after a summer of relative joy. The days flew by too quickly, and as much as I willed them to stay they flew away. I had spent countless days fishing by the river, or biking down to Concord with Renee by my side. On one such day we biked with picnic gear up to a secluded park where no one went. And as we ate I told her I loved her, and asked her to marry me. She just smiled and went on eating, and after a while nodded slowly, and my entire world shook and blurred. We made love under a tall oak tree, in the shade of life itself, and for the first time I did not hear any

screaming or ringing or explosions. I heard nothing but the wind gently brushing the treetops and the leaves of grass stirring under the footprint of a breeze. The sun gently broke through the leaves of the tree, and the fall weather brought the autumn scrolls tumbling to my feet, where I lay with Renee and wept. I wept without reason, but Renee was always stronger, and held me to her and told me that everything was alright, that no ghosts could be here when we were together.

That fall Renee would take me outside under our tree and hold me in her arms. I let myself reconstruct her image in my mind a million times so that whenever I closed my eyes it was only her I could see and her only her voice I could hear. One of those nights we went to a restaurant to eat, and Renee dressed up in her most beautiful dress, and I felt like a shabby fool who had proposed to a queen. Before we left I sat on our couch and held my head in my hands. For the first time in weeks I could not stir the good memories or stop the bad memories. They just came and came, like an unrestricted flow that crashed into my head. Renee was always my anchor though, and she sat down and did not touch me but with her eyes.

"Kay."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did I go off and fight some war? Because some general told me to? Because there was an objective to capture, or burn, or kill?"

"You fought so you could come home and not fear."

"I fear myself more than I fear the enemy. I fear what I have become, what I have done."

And in that moment of weakness I told her everything that I had done. I told her about first killing a man from a distance, and watching him crumple. I told her about stabbing an enemy when he was close, and watching the life stare out of his dying eyes. I told her about killing the guard at the warehouse, and the soldier by the truck, and thousands and thousands of other things that never should have happened by any measurable human standard. I

damned society and life and God and anything else handy to be damnable. I damned those who thought up war in the first place.

"War. A word for absurdity that's all."

"It's war Kay. Do you love me?"

"Yes, oh." I barely was able to speak.

"Then you fought for me, you killed for me, and you were killed for me. You died a thousand times for me, so that you could return home and hold me and know that you died so I could live. I would have gone and died a thousand times for you too."

"Sherbrooke? What was that? I did not kill or die for you, I killed and died for nothing! I saw innocents die and I killed innocents and I wish that I hadn't."

"The war is over."

"The war is never over," I replied bitterly. With that I let myself collapse onto her. We were an hour late for dinner.

We sat down at a table, practically alone at this strange hour. The last warmth of summer was coming through the open windows, which blew majestically like flags in the wind. The air smelled of fragrances from my childhood, without the damp musk of memory. They filled my head with thoughts long lost to me, and filled me with wonder. I sat and held Renee's hand from across the table, glancing around from the outside to her. Outside, the moon was nearly full, yet unable to blot out all the stars which, besides the candle, cast all the light I needed. Everything was white, a pure ivory light which poured from every pore in the sky. Renee herself reflected this light, though times I thought she radiated it herself. A single strand of her hair fell out of place and lay across her face in a way I cannot even begin to describe. In times after, when remembering this moment I cry just thinking about her and that loose strand that I fall asleep to, trying uselessly to adjust it.

Behind us a piano and a violin were engaged in some beautiful dance that soared and glided along the wind like so many fragrances. The piano sparkled like fairy dust strewn across the stars, and each pull of the violin's bow tugged upon the strands of my heart. And before the dinner came I reached forward and kissed Renee, so passionately that I almost fell down. I felt silly after that, and ate in silence and smiles that with each break of dawn upon her

lips, I thought she was revealing just a little more of the secret of life with me. It was one final heaven until the waiter called on me suddenly, and the fragile vignette of peace I had painstakingly framed in this town for the past five months with my love collapsed into madness and sorrow.

I arrived at Jerry's house about the same time as Stan, and together we charged up the stairs of his porch past a few wide-eyed guards who seemed to face more inward of the house than outward. We charged up the stairs where Trenelli stared angrily at the door with a cold rage I found unimaginable.

"He has locked himself inside that room. He is armed. This is all your fault Lieutenant!" she yelled, not at any one of us in particular.

"Had he stayed within a cell he would have never gotten possession of a—"

Stark came in, slamming the front door shut and shadowed by a duet of guards.

"Quiet Trenelli. Kay, go in, talk to him."

"Are you crazy General? That man is armed and dangerous and we shou—"

"We should do nothing Colonel. You may step down at any time."

She did so. Stan nodded and backed up, and Trenelli and a few guards did the same. I knocked loudly on the door.

"Jerry? Jeremy Pratt? It's Kayson. I'm here to help."

"Kay? Kay is that you? Come in, come in. I'm in a different room. But I swear to God Kayson, if you bring a gun or people with guns inside, I'm going to blow your fucking brains out!"

"Alright Jerry. I am not armed, and I am not bringing anyone inside with me." I motioned for the guards to get out of view. I turned the doorknob and went inside.

"Close the door! Close it dammit!"

I shut the door.

"Lock it!"

I did.

When Jerry heard the door lock click he came out and greeted me. He looked tired. In his hand was an officer's pistol, from where I did not know.

"Jerry. Jerry put the gun down. No one here is trying to hurt you. If this is about the charges, we're working on that investigation. They will be dropped, I'm sure."

"That's just the thing Kay. Oh God, that's just the thing. It's true."

"What?"

"Everything they said about me, everything they said I did—"

"Jerry, what are you talking about? You shouldn't do this, you aren't well I'll get a medic here and—"

"No dammit Kay, listen. Jesus, Kay, they took my wife. They took my wife and blackmailed me. And I did what they told me to, and I gave them all our books and plans and... oh God."

"Jerry, don't do this."

"How many people did I kill? How selfish was I? Mary was everything to me and, and I just threw away lives like small change to get her back. Dammit, she wasn't on vacation Kay, oh they had her."

Something inside me clicked horribly and a black light shone throughout the room. I sat down on the bed.

"Jesus."

"I know Kay! Look at me, look at what I have done, what I have become. Oh those men I left dying back there know!"

"Jerry—"

"And then, then, they killed her, just to spite me! They used me and got the information out of me and killed her. They were toying with me, but they knew I would give in. They knew I was soft inside."

"You are not soft Jerry. Had I been the one, and Renee, I would have done what—"

"Shut up! You have no idea. I ran Kay, during those battles I ran into the forest and kneeled by a tree and covered my ears and I screamed and screamed for it all to stop. All I wanted was to go home, but when I got home she was gone, and now...now..." Jerry stopped, sobbing hysterically.

"Jerry-"

"Don't you see Kay? All those battles, they knew where we were. The battle by the cliff, unde-"

"What are you saying?"

"I told them where we were. I told them everything Kay. I told them where we were, I told them we destroyed Sherbrooke, and they are hungry for revenge. And I told them the gaps in our line, and they are coming Kay. They are coming for vengeance, righteous and virtuous."

"What have you done? Our people-"

"They are virtuous!"

"They are not virtuous."

"Doesn't matter. I won't let them get me, I'm not going to do that. I have doomed us all, but I am still selfish enough to save myself! I am going to save myself Kay. I am redeemed!"

I slowly got up and moved towards the door. A sense of sickness had grown within me and spread until I felt like vomiting. I moved towards to door. Jerry motioned with his gun at me.

"Go Kay! Tell them that they will not get Pratt, that Pratt is righteous, that Pratt is virtuous."

I put my hand on the door, turned the knob and went outside.

"Kay what happened?" Stan asked. I brushed by him and everyone else and all their questions. All I wanted was air, fresh and pure, and somewhere to throw up. I began down the stairs and was almost to the bottom when I heard Pratt's final screams.

"Tell them Kay! Tell them Pratt is redeemed!"

I ran from then on, and I was outside by the moon and stars vomiting when the gunshot echoed into the night sky.

They were coming. They were coming exactly as Jerry Pratt had described, down from the sky like virtuous angels come to avenge themselves. They would arrive at daybreak and that night I held Renee one last time.

"I'm going back, to fight. Because-" I stumbled. I could not think of a reason.

"Because you want to protect me."

"Yes," I said dumbly.

"Kay come back to me."

"I will," I promised emptily. She hugged me, and her grip was fierce and I felt that she would crush me with her heart.

"Renee. I want you to leave, tonight, and head towards the docks. I've, I've already arranged for a charter boat to Europe-"

"Europe?"

"Yes Renee. Because, I must stay here and die for those I have killed."

"Stop that Kay, you are talking funny."

"I want you to go to Europe," I said hollowly, "and forget about me, and us, and start anew."

"Stop that!" she said angrily. She hit me, a hand to the face. It was the first time she had ever hit me.

"I will never forget you. Never say that again."

"Alright, go to Europe and remember me."

I kissed her forehead and slipped away like a shadow, leaving her holding nothing but air and hope.

Those of us remaining were the only things left. We had to stay to give times for the civilians to flee to the docks and leave. We were one last thin ring, and they charged at daybreak. Stark held Stan and I from the lines, and kept us back. We directed the defense as thousands of fresh angry troops poured in from across the lines. I could not blame them. They wanted an eye for an eye, a town for a town, a soul for something more. There was nothing to do to save the town, and after less than an hour of fighting, Stark ordered us to the docks.

"Run," he said, "run with all your might and God save you all."

He shook our hands and ran forward with his handgun clutched like a man divine. I never saw him again.

Stan and I ran back, towards the docks, towards our homes.

"Kay. They're coming!"

We heard the pounding of footsteps, just blocks away. Then suddenly from the house in front of us, two pitiful lives poured out. It was Stan's wife and baby boy.

"Stan!"

"---! Kay, go!"

"No Stan come on we can get--"

I was interrupted by the roar of troops and the occasional round of gunfire.

"Come on!"

I grabbed Stan's wrist and pulled him towards the clock tower.

"No dammit! Let go Kay. Emily, Emily, take Bobby and go hide. I will stop them." For a moment the light graced Stan's face, and I really believed his willpower alone could have stopped that entire army.

Stan's family ran on down the streets while Stan followed me up a clock tower. We were still on the main street in town. We climbed up the stairs. A rush of soldiers in brown and gray came down the street. I settled by the window quickly, loaded my gun, and took a quick aim. A single soldier was rushing by, in a hurry, followed by a small group of tightly knit men. I fired at the lead soldier, and hit him in the throat. He barely motioned upwards until he fell back into a puddle of his own blood. There was a succession of yells as the men behind the fallen one took cover. I picked out another one and put a bullet through his temple as he turned to yell out orders. He collapsed and was dragged back into cover.

"Kay. I want you to go. I will surrender, and you slip out while I distract them."

I motioned no but Stan already was climbing down the steps. I got up to leave also, but a clamor of movement later the entire building was surrounded.

"---," I swore.

I watched as Stan arrived at on the street. They took the bait, but it was useless. I was trapped in the building unless something distracted the troops surrounding it. However, they believed Stan was the only one in the tower, the one who had fired into the troops. They emerged from hiding. I knew firing would only bring upon a full assault on my position. I clenched my fists and held on. They emerged slowly, guns at ready as Stan emerged, unarmed, with his hands at his sides. The enemy blinked as for a

moment, Stan and the entire army stood still. I almost smiled, watching Stan face an entire army, and stopping it by himself.

"I am Stanley Lowe. I am the man you are looking fo--"

A round of gunfire ripped from the nearest soldier and Stan crumbled to the ground, that mighty tower of indomitable strength toppled to the floor clutching his heart.

They dragged Stan onto the side of the street. They dragged all the people who had died defending the town to the side of the street. It grew cold, and it was evident to me that God was about to show his mere disapproval at the event with a little snow. I did not move from my tower, watching the ants pile body upon body of my friends down the lines of the streets. I could not move out of my room for risk of being heard. I could not be seen from my angle, but I had full access to the splendor of slaughter below.

Two hours later they dragged the bodies of Emily Lowe and her baby boy onto the street, dumping them unceremoniously by their husband and father, the fallen tower. I did not let myself cry, I did not let myself think. I only sat in the growing cold and thought about all the ways things had gone wrong. I thought about all the things that I had done wrong in war, in life, and in hoping that I could somehow change things the way I wanted them.

They dragged Trenelli onto the street, still alive, naked and shivering. She shrieked like a child and begged and pleaded, the stony hardness raped out of her. She begged to be spared, she told them she would do anything. In the end they shot her too and placed her alone under a tree close to the street.

The snow was coming finally, in small drifts of dull white that I wished were more like the stars on that night just days ago, when I beheld my love in those shining bright lights and thought nothing wrong could happen. I had created a mirage of peace, a careful vignette of all the barriers in my mind that told me that the war was over, and that I would know peace and love forever in my little town of dreams. But the war was never over, and I fell asleep, cold and lonely, to the whispering harsh wind and thoughts of a hope too cold to nurture in the dark corner where I slept.

The Desert Chronicle

He stood at the edge of the desert, and saw nothing beyond the rolling hills of bleak yellow. The oceans of sand seemed to stretch forever, swallowing up everything. The air itself was being choked, gasping for life in this lifeless void of land.

He thought of this side, point A, and across the forever, point B. It seems that the longer he stood at A, the farther B seemed to slip away. Life itself slipped into the desert, a great black hole of life, painted in the dull colors of yellow and gray, its vastness was not so terrifying as its power

And on the other side, in the vial of life, lay a single drop of water, the most pure water ever made. This water was touched by God himself, and this one drop seemed to be the perfection of the universe. On his side, the man saw infinite water, oceans and lakes and seas of fresh drinking water.

And he stood and thought about the greatness of the desert, and the single drop at the other end, and he took one step into the sand. And from there, another step. And another. And he put his mind forward, and he set his eyes ahead. There was no chance he would succeed. There was no chance he would make it, without horse, camel, car nor water, across the desert. The probability of success was infinitesimally small. And he took another step, and another.

When there is no chance of success, one tends to look back, and long for the safety of the shore, the confines, the safe water before the endless beach that becomes desert that becomes death. The man did not look back. Though he wanted a drink, he took another step. For every thought there was a step, and for every doubt, no regrets. For if he looked back, he would run back towards safety. Towards fear. Towards suppression.

Man must have taken this journey before, he thinks. Somewhere, in the beginning, when it is raining, and the thunder and lightning cross the sky. When the same man did not have technology to shield him, or faith to protect him. Yet, that same man took these same steps. Perhaps a different desert, but the same journey.

That same man, thousands and thousands of years ago, didn't know what lay on the other side, but knew it was something better than he had now. That man took one step, then another.

Now, after time has wasted away that man, a new man treks through this desert unknown. He knows what is at the end now, though not clearly. It is something better. He wants that something badly enough to die for it. Yet for every moment of hesitation a pound is added to his soul. For every step forward, a pound is lifted from his conscience. Along the way, this man meets many mirages. The desert takes on many forms to stray him. His family appears and begs him to turn back. His friends appear to argue his action. Even the ghosts of past wanderers appear to tell him the awesome truth: "There is nothing at the other side my friend." Yet the man takes another step, puts his eyes forward, and goes on. After a while, thirst and hunger have destroyed him, and he drives forward on pure willpower. The sheer human will that makes him live makes him breathe, and that will makes him take another step. He continues

forward, the more his body degrades the more his soul revels in the glory of the moment. All of him is shed away. All the technology that fortified him from his fellow man is crushed in the oblivion, and he walks alone yet comforted in the knowledge that he is one with every man now. All the faith and religion that kept him in his path are stripped away, all the formality and rituals that guided him are flung out into the expanses of the great desert, and he walks still forward, nothing now of a modern man, no watch, no cross, but simply a man.

In this sense he has become one with his ancestor that walked across the same desert. The desert claimed that man's simple faith and technology too. But the modern man has had time to ponder his choice, which only makes it harder. The modern man comes to an oasis, where beautiful girls sing beautiful songs, and a waterfall shimmers from nowhere with the bounties of nature. Yet to even look at this oasis is death.

The desert has drained him. He feels lifeless, and struggling against all the heavens and universe. It seems the infinite wasteland is pressing against him, that every single wrongdoing of man is weighing against his soul. He is bleary eyed, and he struggles to take a step. Yet he sees that he has traveled many a day to get here, and many a year before that. And ahead of him, a small shadow rose from the bleakness. In his path lay a single tree, and inside the single drop of water most pure. He had not tasted water for a long time, and that drop tempts him. And he sits down underneath the tree and thinks a while. As he reaches inside the tree to touch the hand of the universe, the tree and the drop and all that is full of life disappears before him, and where the tree lay is only sand. The warning were true, there is nothing at the end of the desert. Yet the man looks back, and sees his trail extending forever, and though he has failed, he has succeeded, for it feels now that the weight of the cosmos has been released. There may be nothing at the end of the desert for him, but he has no regrets in crossing the void. He is happy, relieved, and peaceful. And he stands a moment, and looks out across the next ocean of sand, the next bleak desert, the next vision of hopeless dreams and nothingness. He knows what is on the other side. He has been to the other side. At the end of that journey is nothing. Yet he smiles, and takes a step into the next desert, and the

next, and the next. For with each step he takes, he is freed of all earthly confines. With each step, the weight is lifted. And step after step, the man's mind is released, his soul is unchained, and his heart is set free. With each step comes happiness, and with each journey, no regrets that he has crossed the void, gained nothing, and has never once looked back.

The Lost and Found



Quell

A writhing **serpent**, wrapping, snaking,
An **anger** rising up within his soul,
To nimbly strike at every human chord
Before it reached his mind. That fragile harp,
In tune and played at first until the sound
Of fervent tones that *ripped* and pulled and sank
His human strings until they threatened death.
Upon his knees and to his temples brought
A **hope** so great but not so elegant;
It was a panic and a found despair,
He ripped his skull and cried out loud a scream
That **slew** the quiet with a razor cry.
Then it was gone, and back in mind was he,
His knees were soft and planted in the ground,
Not **hell** alive, but **earth** which Byron lay.
Committed not upon the ground, he rose,
Two hands to pull and wrench; two ears to hear
The echo of the silent day, **forest** green
Itself was maddening; confusing spires
Of Chaos leaving Byron dizzily
Afloat. Now to his feet he struggled forth
His **heavy** rifle slung upon his back,
He trudges through the tired, dismal snow.
Each step he took was fiery pain upon
His heels. An incarnation, **Lucifer**,
Damnation wrought upon each sole which through
The **forest** walked. His journey not complete,
Still left undone, a tapestry still blank,
Half-woven with the weaver weary. Death,
A banquet rotting. Through the river on
His left, he glimpsed a cool and calming **stream**
Of snow that fell and melted down into
The **ash** that made the **rivers** rush. Upon
A rock above the stream, a gentle voice

Sang out to him. "Oh Byron come and rest
Your weary bones upon these sunny stones."
Poor Byron looked and there he saw a girl
To make the heart lose beat with joy.
A **medic** in her uniform, upon
Her breast and **branded** on her arm, that red
And bloodied **cross** that meant the world to him.
For in her arms he could expect his wounds
To heal and fall away, his heart to **soothe**
And calmly stride. If not these dreams at least
There would be morphine and bandages there,
In her arms. Beckoning to **weary** feet
Upon which much had already been **borne**,
With grim arms raised up forth, he set his mind
To meet her voice which rippled softly through
The **verdant** fields. "Now rest my **weary** soul,
My soldier with his gun, your battle here is
Long gone, your task at hand is now complete."
He heard and wanted to believe, yet in
His mind he heard a whistle calling out:
'For time is short, and time is **keen**, if gone
It would his mortal body leave, and death
With wings spread wide, to see your journey through,
Will greet you at your tomb.' So though he knew
That **paradise** was in her **eyes**, he fled
The scene and walked away, away his **eyes**
Did turn. Inside his head he heard himself,
Aghast at his satanic choice, but past
The **monastery** shut, the **cloister** walled,
The **mind** was sealed, the **fortress** built, until
The tempting **stream** was past, until that voice
Was muffled, gone against the stillness of
The forest. Shuffling on, with wet snow in
His boots, he saw in times gone by ago,
The memory, the one that haunted him:
Dead road before his tired **eyes**, in front
Of him the column, dreary troops whose heads

Were bowed in somber silence in the rain,
A drizzling **gray** that smothered **hopes** and rained
Down not so much as drops but searing lines,
The **splinters** of the wind which fell on backs
Already **heavy** with their burden. Then,
He heard a sound that ~~split~~ the dripping peace,
The clumsy roar and churning thunder of
An engine as the truck drove by. His **eyes**
Were clinging to the edge of passing green
As **it** flew down the road, two moonlit orbs
Struck white as pearls in mist among the gray.
The lines of **soldiers** parted way; the truck
Drove past amongst the backs until there was
A flash, a shock of wind that sounded out
The **storm**. Misfortune and a mine had sent
The truck awry. Courageous officers
Cried "No one move!" and no one did, the last
Strewn bits of **man** and **truck** were evidence
Enough. The silence came, then parted way
For squeaks of human suffering, not loud
But rather **murmuring** and **burbling**. "God,
Oh God, just shoot me, save me, Jesus, help!"
There was more pain than writers could convey
Or give until the many hours had passed,
And only one remained. That scream was pinned
Down deep within a little **green-shelled** man.
One leg was caught beneath the truck, his arms
Had clawed at dirt and earth, to try and move.
"The minesweep team will be here soon," and they
As fools so often do, believed the words.
Alone, a single man stood, rifle ready
To end the **green-shelled** man. His sights upon
His friend not foe, a **cross** that bore no name.
The shot would have been clean, yet luckily
Another cry for vigilance rang out,
And cut the kill just short. The razor edge
Of indecision stopped the rifleman.

He bowed his head in shame and quiet of deeds
He could not do. The hours passed until
That green-shelled man gave way and died, his blood
Ran thick in little pools that saw the light
And shadow of the minesweep team arrived,
Declaring that the road was safe; the mine
Was just a fluke. When night came Byron ran
Away from camp, the road, the truck, the men
In gray, the green-shelled dead, and through the night.
And now he paid, young Byron hiding in
The woods, the darkness hiding treachery.
Infernal rain eventually came slow
Until at last it stopped. His hunger first
Hid soft, but later bit and gnawed upon
His emptiness already burnt with guilt.
Beyond the stream and on his fourth-gone day,
His journey halted, bones too weak. He could
Not carry on. He fell upon his gut,
To move along the ground like some slain beast,
Returning to his lair, burrowing
In with the worms. Until he saw a tree
A yawning breach to hide himself. Inside
He smelled the earth and soil, and picking deep
He found a flower, buried deep here long ago,
A white and tiny, fragile thing, still cold
With winter's icy hand. Its song allowed
The mind to rest at last, until the night
Had passed. Upon his wake, the dream was there
The truck again was there, a somber thought,
An ember, sorrow, creeping sadness, rage
That fed the hungry Byron, setting forth
With new-found hope. From angled trees he set
His foot and limped down through the path. Into
The broad fields lined with bright, into the place
Where shining harvests gave their testament
To golden reapers, singing warblers, and
The distant mountains. A whirling pinwheel

Swung in the sky, azure reflections deep
Above, and Byron smelled his freedom. "Run
On forth," said mind and mouth, with rifle cast
Aside. So close, so real, his senses heard,
And tasted every second of his life.
But Byron saw the guards too late; his gun
Was tossed aside. The bullet ripped on through
The air and toppled Byron in the sun,
His flesh, like clouds were torn apart when they
Like he would part for storms. The guards drew near,
Their cigarettes burned cold in morning dew,
The nicotine that fended off the wind
And bitter frost. The guards stood tall above
Their latest victim, pondering their kill.
The question: "Who?" The answer: "Probably
Another fool, deserter, as no scout
Would run towards us like that." Behind the guards
Two tanks stood still, in meager camouflage.
Their bristling cannons pointed towards the edge
Of Byron's forest. Watching silent mourn,
One guard breathed from his cigarette and threw
It by the cold man's body. Byron's death
Moved nothing new within the guards that day.
"Got pretty damn close to the borderline."
"Yeah, he's the fourth one this week. What a waste."
The border stood in silent morning peace,
For Byron had been very close. If one
More minute had gone by, he could have crossed,
Beyond that line his army could not dare,
And he would have been free. Desertion's price,
The gamble of a dead man. Still, at least
His anger within died, those tides which roared
Receding close, and dreams that fell away,
That wrath that bled with him in harmony,
Away in little pools. And then away
Beyond his cold hand's grasp it went. Now gone,
In slumber, cooling, rasping, slipping, Quelled.

Reflections on the Nature of the Universe

In life, the human experience is defined by the intellectual observation of intense emotional experiences. Reverting to a more primitive psychological sense is a more basic instinctual action that lends to a self protection, a safety shell that protects the thin, fragile human mind. The world, the leviathan of the universe, is actually perceived only through mankind's eyes. The scape of reality is a vast ocean, of which the slow gentle tide of time softly brush upon humanity's solitary hermitage. We are a lonely boat on this infinite ocean, with only each other for company. Whether or not we actually exist in this ocean is beyond our philosophical and technological comprehension. We are our own visionaries, but views of the vast ocean of stars are our only transcendence of this simplistic plane of reality. The angst of the human soul drives all human motive. Mindless automatons are powered by an incomprehensible need, and inspirational yearning to understand and merge with the greater beyond of which we are only observers. The sky of stars swims around the tiny earth, and we are only watching. We have yet the reach to stretch into the infinite and pluck the fruits of the universe's labors. Aggravation of the soul is part of our complexity, the fragmentation of our mentality. Every human being is missing a small piece of their souls, a blurred section of their reality. Every individual must find their won reality in the vast confusion and chaos of ever person's identity. Were the goal of mankind beyond our reach, it would defy our very own sense of self. The chaotic fluid mechanics of this universe can only be defined by humans, and can only be described as beautiful. Things in life are beautiful, from the soft convalescence of rain on silky rose petals to a complex mathematical proof. Whatever we call ourselves is a questioning comprehension of our very existence. Thus we question the very existence of the universe, and the very reality of ourselves.

Prologue to Thanatos

(For one Justin Evans)

The sun had already reached noon when Tesla awoke to greet the Village of Angels. The sun had bypassed her meager shades, and through the window had flooded her room with a brilliant warm light. Tesla wiped back the last remnants of sleep, and rose, sitting, looking out of her room. The air was gentle, the sky radiant, and the forest around the village was cool and quiet. The Village itself was as busy as could be, but she could only hear dim noises and voices. The calm waves of the Lake were just barely perceptible nearby.

Tesla, having taken in the sights and sounds, now clambered out of bed and outside, to find Rydia. Slipping on a simple cotton robe, she walked around the small house and found Rydia working in the garden. She did not disturb her yet, simply

watching her for a moment. A gentle breeze from the Lake found its way around the house, and rustled Tesla's hair.

It was then, finally, that Rydia turned around, startled, to look at Tesla. Tesla greeted her with her normal chirping voice, one that cut through Rydia worse than any knife.

"Hello mother!"

The words settled into Rydia's mind, and troubled her deeply. The deep lines on her face seemed to draw inward, and age her. Not that she was actually Tesla's mother, no, that mystery had yet to be solved. It was simple, really. Tesla had been a child, fifteen years ago, taken to the Village of Angels without notice or guardians. No mother, no father, not even a note. Of course, she could not have been mortal. No mortal could willingly find the Village, yet somehow a baby had. Rydia and her now passed husband had decided to raise the child as their own, and somehow Tesla had never seen the truth.

The forgotten daughter looked at Rydia in a disappointed matter, she had at least expected a hello back. But her mother seemed to be drawn in, in deep thought. The two simply stared at each other for a few moments.

Somewhere from the back of the Village, a scream broke the stalemate of daughter and mother. They both turned, impossibly slow, to face what seemed to be a widespread panic in the Village. The Fallen were scrambling towards Tesla and Rydia, who stood in shock as the sky itself suddenly tore open, as if some great hand had simply willed it. The sky tore white, a pure brilliance so bright it smothered the sun with its glorious glow. From the tear, and the light, two shapes were making their way through, rather harshly. The shapes did not look happy.

The spells protecting the Village of those who were, protected them only from Mortals. Against Angels, the spells simply gave way. Evidence was in the air that day, as two golden angels tore themselves from the sky with great difficulty, and hovered above the Village. Some of the men of the Village looked to be scrambling for arms, and in moments the golden ones were being ringed by a ragged defense. Determined but obviously out-powered, the men of

the Village stood. Tesla's gaze was so transfixed that she never saw Rydia slip back into the house.

It seemed an eternity before something happened again. The Angels, who had been simply hovering until then, suddenly moved forward. The ring collapsed and reformed around the moving forces. Unable to strike at the airborne figures, the defenders of the Village simply watched. Tesla stood like a statue, unable to move, speak, or even think. Her eyes were on the Angels, their brilliance, the very glorious light that moved her to tears, had she any to give. It was then that the angel on the right took notice of her, and raised one gauntlet at her, as if he were toasting her. A few moments later, a few of the defenders seemed to realize their purpose, and the ring extended hesitantly around Tesla.

"Hear this mortals! The child you have come to call your own is a violation of everything we stand for! Even you must remember the laws you once followed, but broke. The child is not right, and we must take her."

Had Tesla had any nerve, she would have been offended by the remark, but the towering, glowing, armored and armed figure drew a massive broadsword and made a wicked gesture in her general direction.

No one noticed Rydia returning outside.

Now the Angels moved forward, eerie wings propelling them into the main body of defenders. Suddenly, one of the men jumped as high as he could and made a wild and clumsy swing. Out of some kind of perverted working of fate, the swing glanced sharply off the shin guard of the nearest. The Angel looked down, as if noticing the very ground underneath him for the first time. He gestured with one of his hands, and a brilliant flare enveloped the man, burning him to ashes. The others pressed the frozen Tesla back. A few of the braver ones shouted back.

"We are separate from you! We live different lives, and live by different laws. We respect yours, you must respect ours!"

"Leave this place now!"

The angels took one glance at each other before moving forward again. Like some sick game, the crowd was pressed back until Tesla could almost feel the forest moving up against her back.

No where left to turn, she thought. Why did they want her? And more importantly, would the Village of Angels give up its orphan? The Angels were now brandishing massive broadswords which glowed a faint blue.

"One last warning mortals! Hand over the child or suffer..."

No one moved.

"So be it..."

One angel stretched forth from within himself, and burned the entire front line of the defenders into ash. One brilliant streak of light followed from the other, and another man fell. However, the defenders were growing braver, and leaping at their assailants. In the distance, the sky shook again as another tear opened. From it three angels, not glowing gold like the others, but still powerful, emerged. Their entrance seemed timed with the dragging down of the first Angel, the one who had not spoken. The men of the Village had simply climbed over him like a surging wave. Their swords waved about as the Golden figure dropped from view. A challenge was issued from the second group of Angels just as the first Golden Angel erupted from his attackers in a vicious blow of light. The defenders scattered, leaving the Golden Angels facing towards their angelic attackers. Now the angels stood across from each other, flittering above the ground. Tesla had not moved.

Now, however, a hand tugged at her sleeve. Tesla turned slowly to see Rydia, urging her to follow. Only, a powerful looking blade was in one of her hands. Tesla had never seen her mother pick up a conventional weapon, not to mention an impossibly heavy broadsword. She recognized it as the weapon that hung above the family fireplace. Her father's sword...?

Rydia half urged, half dragged her charge behind a tree, with strict orders not to move. Tesla watched Rydia sneak out, moving in a way she did not recognize. That could not be her mother, carrying a sword like a soldier, moving about like an assassin. She was not the harbinger of life Tesla had known her for.

The foremost Golden Angel made a movement with one fist, and a horrible beam of light shot forth, slamming into the nearest opposing angel. The holy being shuddered for a moment, holding his place in the air, before being swept back into a building, which

exploded in white embers. A second shot was deflected by another angel. The burst of light shot into the sky, where it touched a cloud. The cloud itself seemed to shiver, then dissolved. The first Golden Angel left his comrade to fight the other angels, and he moved towards the trees. Rydia stepped out from behind a large tree, and simply stood.

"She is my child, and you shall not take her!"

"Move aside mortal, so that you may be spared. You and your child shall be redeemed..."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when Rydia charged him. Rydia held Graedus close to her, the sword radiating a subtle warmth. Graedus gave a low whisper, the sound of wind rustling tree branches. When Rydia struck out, the sword gave out a shrill cry, and seemed to pull her along. The surprised Angel was borne back in a fury of wild hacks and swings, a few sparking when they collided with his armor. Not a single blow penetrated the armor, not a single attack was able to hurt him. Yet he was shocked with the intensity of her fighting. It was as if she actually believed she was Tesla's mother.

Enough, he thought. He motioned with one fist and a burst of light came forth from the fist, hurtling towards Rydia. Then the unexpected happened. The sword in Rydia's hands lit a fiery blue, and seemed to leap up in challenge. It caught the light bolt and deflected it into a tree. The tree moaned brightly, and to Tesla seemed to grow impossible fast. The tree moved through its life in fast motion, and gave one final twitch before exploding in a shower of leaves and bark. Tesla, startled, took a step back, and hid behind another tree.

The Angel was quite surprised that the mortal had defied him. There was no choice but to do things the old fashioned way. He summoned a bit of strength, and simply let the light manifest itself physically. In a moment, a huge wave of pure light washed over the forest, completely decimating it. The Lake beyond shook, spewing waves. Three figures stood before the cataclysm, Rydia, still desperately clutching the sword, the Angel, who looked confident of his success, and Tesla, who besides being a little burnt, was otherwise unhurt.

The angel moved towards Rydia with a broad sweep of his sword. Rydia's sword caught the advance, but barely. Anyone watching would have easily seen that Rydia was no swordsman. Tesla wanted to help, to do something to save her mother, but she was helplessly paralyzed. Graedus was only as strong as its holder, and though Rydia's will was as strong as any, her physical strength was too weak to fight the angel. The Angel had a confidence that even Graedus could not overcome. The sword's flame faltered. She saw the fight end with the Angel making a quick feint, then a upward slicing motion. A painfully loud ring of metal split the air, and the sword fell from Rydia's dead body. It no longer burned its fiery blue.

In the next moment, Tesla found herself looking up at the Angel, noticing his near perfect stature, his golden glowing armor, the intricate crosses that seemed to writhe like snakes on his plating. He flew towards her and simply reached out his hand. With that the world ended for Tesla. She was blinded by an incredible light, she could not see. Her hearing was deafened by a roar that sounded like a large crowd, that would not stop. She groped through the light, helplessly moving faster and faster, higher and higher until she could not breathe. Something within her fought the changes. Something in her would not rise with the rest of her. The human part of Tesla writhed painfully. With a set will, Tesla subdued her humanity, and found a hand reaching for her through the light. She grabbed the hand, barely noticing the burning white armor encompassing it. The last thing she saw through her mortal eyes was a beautiful cross burned into a plate of silver on the wrist of some heavenly being. Then she was pulled through, and disappeared.

Cronus sat on a ridge, just above the spot where the Village of Angels had once been. The entire Village had burned to the ground, even the ashes seemed to burn. Whatever heavenly forces that had been in play had now retreated back to their domain, except for him. He folded his wings about him like some mantle or coffin, or perhaps a blanket. He stared down at a ruined piece of the earth, and frowned slightly. Why had he been unable to find that stubborn woman's sword? His frown deepened. He had succeeded,

perfectly. Then why did he feel wrong inside? With that he unfolded his wings in a glimmering flash, and hesitantly rose to the heavens.

[Note from the Author:

Jumper was written before September 11th, 2001, and the author does not intend, in any way, disrespect for those who tragically lost their lives in the attacks. It is a piece of literature only, and shouldn't be interpreted beyond that in any way. It was originally published online with hidden text and a hidden ending. However, in light of the September 11th attacks, this story had been removed.]

Jumper

*"Sometimes, things are not what they seem. Sometimes you have to read beyond the words, look beyond the light
Examine the darkness."*

"And then?"

"And then I'll be back. Just a few days."

"Oh."

"What, am I going miss something?"

"No," Karen replied.

"Nothing's going on here. The world conference but-

"Ah, that's dumb anyways."

"Agreed."

He moved towards the door, his suitcase and travel bag dragged along behind him. He brushed his shirt and straightened himself out. She got up from the couch where the TV blared, and

stood between him and the door. He squirmed while she straightened his shirt and collar.

"Winston, be careful okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'll be right back."

He kissed her and picked her up, swinging her around and placing her out of the way.

"I'm going to be late. Bye, love ya,"

"Bye!"

"Goodbye."

On the airplane leaving the airport several hours later, Winston stared blankly out the window. The plane was delayed. They coasted around like toy planes being moved by a confused child, until eventually his flight pulled up to the runway. They took off with a rumble. As they rose in the sky, Winston pulled out the standard fare magazines and flipped through them uselessly.

There was a slight bump followed by a few minutes of rumbling. Winston took no notice at the time. He landed in Albuquerque without incident. Without incident.

Every year, a conference of the wealthiest nations on earth occurs. This world conference was disrupted every year. This year was different. This year, a terrorist group entered the heart of New York City with a small nuclear weapon, managed to slip past the security perimeter and set off the bomb. Major leaders from every country involved were killed, including the President of the United States of America. It was the first case of nuclear terrorism ever. Civilian casualties were horrendous.

Within days, deep within the New Mexican desert, something stirred.

Dawn in New Mexico was always dark.

Winston Smith stood on the roof of a large building inside the Labs, its rustic brown roof swept by strange winds and a dry air that

left Winston gagging occasionally. The wind whipped his tie around. It hadn't been much of a first day. He had checked in for his interview tired and haggard. He hadn't shaved since New York, and had barely showered. They had dismissed him and sent him to wait in an uncleared office area. He had gone to the roof for fresh air, staring at the mountain and wondering.

Behind him, the scrape of concrete forced him to turn around. An older man with thin gray hair was walking slowly towards him, a black suit flapping in the wind.

"Mr. Smith?"

"Yes, yes."

"Hi, my name is Eirston Blair."

"Mr. Blair," Winston repeated.

"Yes. I came from the people at the clearance office."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Smith but you were not accepted for the position you were seeking."

"No. Of course not."

Blair waited as Winston scraped a while.

"You, you're from New York City right?"

"Yes."

"And your wife was there."

"Karen, yes," Winston said. His gaze was as distant as a gaze could be. His voice, empty.

"I'm sorry. About what happened. Terrible thing really. So many innocents killed."

"Yes. Innocent people. Terrible."

Blair waited again, letting Winston regain his sense and feelings. He stood with his hands in his pockets as Winston continually brushed back his hair.

"Mr. Smith, if you are willing, there is another job opening. You are very qualified for the position."

Winston gave him a cold stare.

"It is an immediate matter. Let me show you."

"Show me what?"

"Something you've never seen before. Something to redeem you."

Winston shuddered at the word redeem, and coldly followed Blair down the stairs and out into a waiting car. *There is nothing left to redeem but myself*, Winston thought.

The helicopter was extremely noisy as it roared over the bleak rolling hills of desert. Everything looked the same, and Winston tried not to think about the consequences of getting lost out here. The sun was hot and beat down on the helicopter, which only contained Blair, Winston, and a pilot. The pilot hadn't said a word yet.

Finally on the horizon a few specks in the gray appeared. As they drew nearer the dots drew into focus and materialized into a few buildings surrounding one giant building. The giant building itself was buffered by massive power lines and pipes, stretching forth from the main lab like a humming, technological sprawl. In the middle of the spider's web, the hungry beast awaited.

They landed at a pad away from the main lab. Winston climbed down dizzily from the helicopter and entered the main building. The inside was spotless and absolutely undecorated. A single woman occupied a simple gray desk that was totally bare. She was obviously waiting.

"Listen Winston, I have to get going, but I'll catch up with you later. Patty will show you the way."

The woman looked bored as she led Winston into a sizable conference room. She sat him down and left him alone, wondering, waiting.

The room was like the rest of the facility, gray, polished and totally undecorated. Winston imagined that this is what prison must look like. As his eyes wandered the room, the door slowly opened and a white haired man in a business suit entered. He looked like he was in his late fifties, though a glimmer of youth in his eyes still flickered in the strong room lights.

"Ah hello Winston. I'm Mr. Jones from the-the government."

"The government eh."

"Lets just say a very important but very secret organization that deals with national security and world security."

"You mean the NSA?"

"Not-no-not exactly Winston, but I suppose we're something like that. Something, something-"

"And I-"

"Yes! Yes, ye-you have a very important mission here. Maybe you should have a seat."

Winston was already seated, but Jones didn't pay much attention. Instead, he loaded up a computer and readied a few slides.

"A-as you may know, well, you should know, yes, yes, you know, there, was, a terrible terrorist bombing a few days ago."

"Yes. My wife was killed by the blast."

"Yes, I see why."

"Why?"

"As-as I was saying, Mr. Smith, uh, Winston, I am from a government agency very concerned about that event. It is difficult to say for certain, but many people think the United States has been... crippled by the bombing. In fact, my superiors think that we should take all chances to prevent such an incident."

"Prevent."

"Yes Winston! Prevent. We prevent all sorts of bad things. But before we had to make sure they didn't happen, for if we failed there wasn't much to be done. Do you know much about physics Winston?"

"I am a physicist."

"Ah! Ah, yes, of course you are. Well then, you may know-wait no you don't know about that."

Winston was getting a headache listening to Jones ramble, but he wondered how physics and the bombing were related.

"You see, Winston, you see, this facility is top secret. No one, well, very few people know about it. Like me. And a few very esteemed scientists. Do you know what we do here? Well, no, of course not. This is an advanced fusion research facility, funded purely by the government. Well, at least that's what it started out as. It's become something very, very different now."

"Different how."

"Well, you know how fusion works, being a physicist."

"Uh, generally."

"Well, the scientists here burn up little spheres by compressing huge amounts of energy into them. But a few years ago, something very odd happened at this facility. Well, lets just say some very interesting things happened. But it seems that we were able to break the time-space continuum."

"Break? Like, black hole break?"

"No,no no. Not quite, anyway. Maybe, bend. We were able to, well, something, not we, was able to travel back in time."

Winston stared. *This must be the most expensive hoax ever*, he thought.

"No, of course you don't believe me. But what if I told you that you had the chance to go back. To change the course of history. To-to-to *jump*, shall we say back before the bombing and prevent it. Your area of expertise, is, of course, neutron generators."

"Well yes but ho-"

"So, you-you have the expertise to disable a nuclear bomb."

"Who's to say? Why don't you send a bomb squad? Wait, what am I saying, this is all a bunch of bullshit anyways."

"Winston. Come now, surely you must realize the gravity of this situation, the importance. Have you ever heard or seen this facility before? Could anyone else but the government built it? Or find you."

"But why me? Again, the bomb squad experts-"

"There are, there are three general criteria for our-our, shall we say, *jumper*. The first is the ability to disable a bomb. I'm sure a bomb squad member could, of course, but then again I'm sure you could too.

The second factor is a general knowledge of advanced physics. If something goes wrong you could jump too far, or not far enough. You have the knowledge, moreso than a bomb expert, to make the jump.

And third, third, most importantly third, you lost. You lost your wife in the blast. That makes this personal. That makes you believe, or at least want to believe. If we brought in someone else like you, they wouldn't care, or risk their lives, for they have their own

family to attend to. You-you are different. You have nothing to lose but hope."

Jones paused to let it sink in.

"In any case, you don't have a terribly wide range of options."

"Oh really."

"Well, yes. My superiors think it was a bad idea to show you this place. And it was. Because if you don't accept, I can't let you return with the knowledge of this place."

"You'd kill me."

"Uh, well-well that might be excessive. Maybe. But the other option is better."

"Jump."

"Yes! Jump. Save your wife, save countless others, save your country. Be our jumper."

"Can I think a while? Talk to the scientists here."

"Well, no. It takes more energy to make a longer jump. After tonight, it'd take more energy than we have available Winston.

I need to know now."

Winston thought.

Karen...

Eirston Blair met him in the clean room, barging in while Winston was putting on his suit over his everyday clothes.

"Hello Winston. I told you we'd meet again."

"You didn't tell me that there wouldn't be a choice."

"Of course I didn't. If I had, would you have come? Doubtful. You would have gone home and grieved and lived on a quiet hurt life."

"Maybe. So you are with Jones' agency?"

"Hell no! Those government nuts, sneaking around. No, I'm with the science team here."

"Ah. It's official. I'm in hell."

"Save that thought for later. Let me tell you about the machine. This is a complex G-285R hyper-compression DT pellet fusion reactor that uses super hot compressed layers of-

He trailed off, realizing that Winston was more busy looking at his suit.

"Anyway, a few years ago, shortly after I joined, an accident occurred."

Winston looked up.

"What kind of accident?"

"Well, it was to be our highest energy test to date. Only, ten minutes before the test the chamber evacuation alarm went off. Something was stuck in the chamber. That was weird since it was cleared just minutes ago. We looked inside, and the fuel pellet was there. Only, it hadn't been inserted yet. It was 10 minutes early. No one had seen the machine move the pellet in. No one had authorized it. Well, we delayed the test a few moments, and finally fired it. The pellet disappeared completely shortly after fusion."

"Wait one god-damn moment. I'm going to be burned to oblivion before I even-"

"Hang on Winston. After we figured out what the hell was going on, we've made some modifications. It'll be a little cramped, but it should work."

"Wait another god-damn moment. You mean no one else has done this before?"

"Well, till now there's been no real reason to. Nothing smaller than this could make us use the machine. Well, not us, just those government bastards!"

"I...am going to die."

"Look, it's getting harder and harder to send you back while you sit around and pout. Do you have those documents?"

Winston held up the documents that would gain him travel to New York and entry into the summit red-zone.

"Don't you ever worry sometimes? Worry that what you're doing is screwing up time somehow? Like that old paradox."

"Well, you aren't going back to kill your grandfather, so we'll be alright."

"Yes, but-"

"Look Winston, it seems that some things are important enough to justify this. Don't you want to go back? To make the

jump, save the woman you love, and return to live out your life happily?"

"I want to know, that if I jump, I'll have something to return to."

Blair stared.

"You should get going Winston."

The chamber was totally dark. There were no windows or such, only a thick sphere that Winston was crammed into, along with his suit. He clutched the papers in his gloved hands. It was dark and cold, and Winston thought how miserable the afterlife would be if it consisted of a dark and cold and lonely sphere that was cramped.

Hold on to the papers tight. Emerge from the chamber, ask for Eirston Blair, give him the papers, and he will take care of the rest. Winston was supposed to emerge two days before the incident, which would give him enough time to get to New York and stop the bombing. Of course, they didn't know whether the Winston Smith of the other time period would disappear or not, but two days before the incident Winston had been en route to a business trip. That trip had been the first of two; the second had occurred right after the accident.

If there was another Winston waiting on the other side, then he would occupy Karen and the real world.

If there wasn't, Winston would have to talk to Karen about it.

With these thoughts in mind, Winston felt the machinery hum around him, and within his suit, the general anesthetic was administered.

He emerged from the machine tired. Tired like he had not slept for three days. He climbed out of the machine when it opened, his limbs dead, slipping in high grade oil and cables. The science team had an aneurysm. It was one thing to find a fuel sphere appear from nowhere. A human in a space suit, that was something different.

"Eirston Blair. I need to talk to Eirston Blair."

The team was prepared for this. They had been told, after they disclosed to the government the feasibility of time travel, that they could get 'the call' at any time. This was it, and Eirston Blair stood staring at a strange man named Winston Smith, holding papers that spelled the doom of a world. Winston Smith, their last hope.

"And why can't they just tighten security that day?"

"The terrorists would probably find another way. They probably had backup plans. But if we move quietly, they will think they are good to go. Then we swoop in, disable the bomb, and everything is fine. Things are the way they should be."

"We? You."

"Right."

"We're going to have to check this."

"That's why I arrived early."

"Why don't you wait at the facility while we check this."

"Eirston, do me a favor?"

"Yes," Blair said.

"Call my aunt in D.C. 202-459-9389"

"Why?"

"at least it's not my father..."

"Ask if Winston Smith is home. If he is, hang up immediately."

Blair went off puzzled, and Winston, for the first time in negative three days, smiled.

It took a full day to find Mr. Jones of the mysterious agency. Winston waited for confirmation, watching time tick by, anxiously awaiting the chance to go and make things right again. Blair came back that first night with fast food and a strange message.

"There was no Winston Smith at home. They found your luggage and flight pass abandoned at the airport. You are presumed missing."

Winston chewed in silence at this news.

The hours moved.

Very.

Very.

Slowly.

The night of August 4th, Winston Smith received word from Mr. Jones that he was to board a plane to New York immediately. Business class. He was to travel inconspicuously and arrive silently in the early hours before the summit began.

Mr. Jones didn't trust this Winston Smith entirely. He would have a full security team meet him at the airport. If what he was saying was right, he would be met with a full bomb squad. They would do their search starting two hours before the time of the bombing, and continue on throughout the day. Doom wasn't the problem. The problem was trusting the jumper.

Winston arrived at gunpoint. Agents in business suits and small handguns escorted him to an armored car. There he met a military officer, a government official, and the bomb squad leader. They drove through the cities of New York, where the sun was just rising. People were already out in the streets. Kids played hopscotch under the rising golden rays, while others slept quietly when the honks of the horns were not so frequent. They were waiting for sun to rise, and the city that never sleeps would be awakened. *But by what?*

"Ah, Winston Smith."

"Mr. Jones."

"I'm probably more familiar to you, than, than the other way around, yes?"

"Probably."

"Your mission here is grave, Winston. We have received the documents and the details, and our bomb squads are more than qualified if you are right. Perhaps you should go home and return to your wife."

My wife, Winston thought. My wife woke up this morning, and I wasn't in bed because I didn't return home from D.C. the night before.

"No, no need to worry her. Lets get on with it."

"You know, Winston, if-if, if you say, do succeed, you can never tell anyone?"

"Of course not."

"That's a good boy now. Good. Good."

They waited past dawn and into the morning. They searched anything as large as a handbag. They searched everyone, including the President of the United States and all the foreign ministers and ambassadors. The day passed, and near the close of that day of the summit, the bomb squad was called off.

Winston walked around one final time, debating whether or not to call Karen and make sure she was alright. All around him, important people whisked by with important papers and things that would dictate the lives of millions of people. A different life had a nuclear bomb gone off. But it hadn't. Winston had changed history just by jumping.

As he was returning to Mr. Jones and the armored car, he noticed a black jeep that hadn't been there when he had started his walk. He turned towards it and walked near at a slow pace. In the back of the jeep was a large box.

Winston ran up as quietly as he could, and reached for his radio by his side.

"I found it! I found it! By the west entrance, near the tri-fountain," he whispered harshly.

Inside the jeep, the dusk was masking a figure still moving around. The man had a small device in his hands, and he slowly got out of the car. Winston froze. *Should I jump him, and risk setting it off? Should I wait for backup? What if he's going to do it now?* His breath was long. And then the figure turned around, a flash of darkness.

"Who the hell are you?"

The bomb squad opened fire and the figure crumpled to the ground. Winston snatched up the controller for the bomb.

"It's not timed. It's not timed."

Winston sat down on the curb by the jeep.

"It's not timed. It's not timed."

Winston missed his flight that night. He snuck into his wife's bed while she was still asleep, and the night was finally closing, the last horns honking, the last kids dreaming. He wrapped his arms around Karen and whispered softly, "I'm back. I'm back."

"You were late."

Winston sighed and closed his eyes.

As he was returning to Mr. Jones and the armored car, he noticed a black jeep that hadn't been there when he had started his walk. He turned towards it and walked near at a slow pace. In the back of the jeep was a large box.

Winston ran up as quietly as he could, and reached for his radio by his side.

"I found it! I found it! By the west entrance, near the tri-fountain," he whispered harshly.

Inside the jeep, the dusk was masking a figure still moving around. The man had a small device in his hands, and he slowly got out of the car. Winston froze. *Should I jump him, and risk setting it off? Should I wait for backup? What if he's going to do it now?* His breath was long. And then the figure turned around.

"Karen!"

"Winston!"

"Karen what are yo-"

"Winston I thought you were gone. I thought you had left. Why didn't you leave! You were supposed to be gone, far away from here by now. By now! Far away, Winston."

"Karen wh-"

"You didn't come in this morning. I didn't know where you were. Your aunt said you weren't there, and the company couldn't reach you."

"You, you, you," Winston whispered to himself.

"I was going to wait until you were gone. I was going to wait until you were far away. I didn't want you to get hurt."

Winston saw the squad approach from the corner of his eye.

"I'm sorry it went this way Winston. I love you, I would never do this to hurt you. Not you, Winston. Not you."

The squad opened fire just as the bomb exploded.

Winston Smith caught a late flight that night, yawning in his window seat. Karen was gone when he got home, so he left the most endearing letter he could, with all his love, and boarded his plane.

As the plane lifted off and climbed to cruising altitude, there was a small jump in altitude and a small wave of turbulence, followed by a general uneasiness in the plane. The pilots ordered the head stewardess out early for drinks to calm down the passengers. The plane shook in the unusual night.

"Ladies and gentlemen we are just a few thousand feet away from our cruising altitude. There is a little turbulence tonight, but it is all normal. On a brighter note, drinks are coming around. On behalf of myself and the crew, have a good flight."

From the other side of the plane, passengers were gawking at the light in the sky, which spewed from the ground like a fountain of fire. People rushed from both sides of the plane to see the display.

Winston, though, was already asleep, his dreams filled with the woman he had left behind in New York City.

