

*The Suicide Diaries*



*Eugene O'Neil*

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2010906996

ISBN: Hardcover 978-1-4535-0282-2

Softcover 978-1-4535-0281-5

E-book 978-1-4535-0283-9

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Contents

[Preface](#)

Soul Mining

[Chapter 1](#)

Slappy

[Chapter 2](#)

The Bag Lady

[Chapter 3](#)

Poles

[Chapter 4](#)

Fermentation

[Chapter 5](#)

Reciprocity

[Chapter 6](#)

The Others

[Chapter 7](#)

Making It Right

[Chapter 8](#)

The Preacher Man

[Chapter 9](#)

PeeWee

[Chapter 10](#)

Anatomy of A Killer

[Chapter 11](#)

Generations

[Glossary of Terms](#)

# Preface

## Soul Mining

Everyone is responsible for his life before God who has given it to him. It is God who remains the sovereign Master of life. We are obliged to accept life gratefully and preserve it for his honor and the salvation of our souls. We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of.—Catholic Catechism on Suicide: (2280)

But *what if?* What if your soul was beyond repair and you open your eyes to the brilliance of life and see nothing but black? What if your body and soul deflate day after day and you cannot find the hole from which it is escaping? What if on your journey through life, you breathe, but instead of air you inhale despair and exhale ashes from your soul long since burned to ash inside your broken body? What if you bathe, and watch your lifeblood swirl down the drain? What if you cannot see, cannot hear, cannot taste or feel? What if the food you eat is charcoal, if the wine you drink is sour? What if you lose the ability to walk, to talk? What if you lose the ability to love? What if all these things; what would you do? Who would you be? What would you do?

What if the sun rises blood red on your broken battlefield, and sets, casting pale shadows of crucifixes upon your dead? And you feel nothing. What if you cease to be and melt into the shadows, watching, listening and coveting? What if you smoke a cigarette, and feel nothing as the ember burns the flesh of your lips? What if after all these things were taken from you, and you become a specter, ceasing to exist in this world, invisible to society and numb to your own humanity?

What if you take your life and no one sees it fall?

## Chapter 1

*I live in the shadows, I blend with the walls,  
Nobody sees me, my life's poison tea.  
My person despicable, my soul I appall,  
I am a dead sea, and the old hanging tree.*

### Slappy

He wasn't always called Slappy; it was just something that stuck to him when he was real young. Slappy. Something about the way he walked, awkward, like a marionette, someone pulling on his strings, dare say *controlling* him, all jerky and drunk-like.

Slappy lived with his ma and his pa and sister Sally in a small and tidy house on a chicken farm in Enoch, Utah. They scratched out a living as chicken farmers, selling both eggs and chickens. They had about twelve acres that grew good hay, and they sold that too. Enoch was a sleepy little town of about five thousand people. The town was located just west of Interstate 15, in the south west corner of Utah. Most people had no reason to stop in Enoch and kept driving right on through it. Enoch was less than vital, but it did have its beauties (and some were spectacular). The town lay in the wide fertile valley and had breathtaking views of the high hills to the east. They were seasonally snowcapped. It was picturesque, and with the sun just right, the hills and water at the bottom of the valley produced colors so beautiful they

didn't even have names, but they would simply take your take your breath away.

What was particularly exceptional was to watch a storm roll down the valley from Minersville into Enoch. Storms here in the valley had a good 245 miles to travel and develop. By the time they could be seen peeping around the mountains at Enoch, they were well developed and had a show to put on. They were she-devils, with all the wrath and fury of a scorned woman. Storms usually followed a north/south track, hugging the bottom of the valley as they moved. From the farm, there was a really good view to approaching storms from the yard in front of the farmhouse. Facing south, they could be seen rolling in. These storms, angry she-devils with churning clouds, purple and slate, huge in size, would creep and pull themselves along the valley floor. Big spooky hands of the storm would grasp hold of trees, houses, and stones, and pull themselves forward. As the dark brooding storm moved down the valley, sheet lightning would flash in horizontal sheets offering glimpses of the workings inside the angry cloud column. As the purple translucent monster approached, the clouds would churn and blow a cool air down the valley that held the first drops of cool water. Exponentially increasing in power, the full force of the storm would arrive at Enoch with all her hellfire, hot flashes of lighting, and downpours of black rain.

Slappy wasn't a weather buff, or anything of the sort, but the storms consistently drew Slappy out of the house like a magnet, where he would watch them. Even when Slappy was

little, Ma would notice that storms would calm him, even from his most foul of moods. When he was a toddler, she would find him outside at three o'clock and four o'clock in the morning in the nastiest of storms, twirling with his arms outstretched and giggling in delight. He would insist on staying out, despite Ma's begging, and they would sit in the storm until it was over then hurry inside and get warm dry things on. Slappy had the love of storms and the habit of going out into them through his youngster years right up into his teenage years. As Slappy got into his teens, he would go out in the storms, but it had become a deeply personal experience to him. He would become detached from reality and entranced by the power of the storm. He would commune with the power of the storm and strip down to his underwear while in it. Pa and the others sloughed it off as nothing, but Ma always wondered what the fascination was and how it came to be.

As Slappy grew older, he took on normal interests: girls, cars, movies, and sorts, but he continued experiencing the storms when it was possible. He preferred the night storms, they seemed more powerful, more spectacular, and he would strip off his shirt and pants, select the green fiberglass weave aluminum chair, and sit down in it and watch the storm roll in. He'd watch that storm rolling down the valley, the purples, the browns, the blacks and the lightning all balled up inside, and become mesmerized. As the storm would bounce off one valley wall then another, his lips would move silently and the blood would drain from

his legs. He would watch her. He could smell her—the cold air that precedes a storm, mixed with the ozone that she had broken down and released as millions of volts of lightning. Slappy would lean back and inhale deeply, feeling the ozone in his lungs and smelling the terrain from down the valley. The storm would close in. Maybe fifteen minutes away. Slappy would feel the updraft in the winds—winds escaping to make room for her, and the first drops of rain from the storm would hit his face. He would hold his hands out, close his eyes, and listen. He heard the wind begin to touch random things—the birdfeeder, the wind chime, the weeping birch branches. He also heard the raindrops begin to randomly strike—the chair, the roof, the grass, the petunia blossom just below him. Then exponentially, in the space of thirty seconds, she would arrive. Blowing. Raining. Thundering. Demanding what could not be given. She was here. It would turned pitch black. Slappy would go completely limp as the rain fired down upon the earth, upon Slappy, upon all that was good and decent, she rained down. It was so dark that you could only see Slappy's face when the lightning crashed; hope, fear, jealousy and love. The rain would coat his entire body top to bottom, and he almost always became completely naked in the lawn chair, but not remember how. It was a sensual experience for Slappy, and he found the storms stimulated him in every way.

Slappy was a good boy—he did his chores (of which there are many on a farm). He was a big boy, the second

tallest in school, and by far the strongest when it came to measures of strength and ability. Well, like mostly happens, Slappy grew out of that awkward stage and got his coordination better, but it was his size that was the most fearsome about Slappy. He never played well with others, and didn't fight those who would taunt him, because he knew the he'd come out as a one-sided victor, and knew he had a temper. He was a good-looking boy, some would even say handsome—he had tawny blonde hair, blue eyes, straight white teeth, and broad shoulders. A good-looking boy. A strong boy. A damn good-looking boy. He was kind, gentle as a teddy bear, and loved being in storms.

Slappy liked hanging around his pa, and was interested in machines and things that moved. He was mechanically inclined and learned to operate the tractor at the age of eleven. A lot of the other kids in school mostly worked on farms too. Slappy would do more and more on the farm as he grew—swathing, bailing hay, tilling, and the like. His hair would bleach white and his arms and legs would tan real nice, and Pa would steal sidewise glances of him, and he was proud. Slappy noticed he was growing too, and would briefly admire himself in the mirror in his bedroom. He'd flex his biceps and smile. He looked good. The hard work around the farm had given him a magnificent physique.

As he grew up, at sixteen or seventeen years old, Slappy tried to court the girls, but he didn't get many dates. He was still a bit "Slappy," or a "goof-off," something that most people interpreted made him socially awkward or strange.

Slappy's sister Sally got him over the rough spots, so he wouldn't get his heart broke too many times. Sally knew that the girls didn't like him because they were poor, and Slappy was unconventional and introverted. It was almost a crime against God that Slappy, with his Olympian physique and kind heart was so quickly dismissed. But it was. There was really no way out for Slappy, excepting unbridled success of the family farm or some other miracle. But things can change, even though nothing in place allows change to take place.

One day there was another "misfit" in the class whose name was Rose. There was a quiet hum one morning as the students talked about "the new girl" amongst themselves, all bad gossipy things of course, and in a short time she was not welcome in any cliques. Class was called and everybody took their seats at their desks. Slappy squeezed into his seat, sitting several rows behind her, and found her to be beautiful. She had thick dark hair, almost black, and her skin was very light and glowing. He was plundering glances of her beauty, and he felt it was wrong but he could not resist. Her lips were deep red and she had large, deep flashing blue eyes. She was petite and timid, and tried to stare straight ahead to avoid all those talking about her and all around her. She turned around to look at her protagonists, and Slappy smiled at her and she smiled back. Gossip was Rose's family came from a large farm east of Enoch near Parowan, about a thirty minute drive from Enoch. The bank had foreclosed on the farm. Her family lost everything and

had to leave Parowan and try to start again. The school population already hated Rose for vague reasons: she was very attractive, she was poor, and for lack of logic, was new to the school. Another reason the girls disliked her was that the school goofball, Slappy, liked her.

At lunchtime that day, Rose was by herself behind the school, sitting on the green grass in the warm sunshine with her back against the sun-warmed red bricks of the school. Slappy wandered over and greeted her with an awkward handshake, and they began to have a conversation. Slappy sat down beside her. He told her all about Enoch, farming tasks, and mean kids in the school. She told him about poverty and hunger and their family having their farm foreclosed upon and moving to Enoch to start afresh. Everything just clicked. Slappy couldn't much help himself but to fall in love with Rose the more he talked to her. Her way of talking, her gentle persona, her beauty and her sweetness cast a spell upon Slappy. He was smitten. When they had finished the conversation, Rose was taken with the gentle giant with his caring heart and sweet personality, Rose loved this striking Olympian, and felt safe with him. Fate is a strange animal. They had both suffered, each in their own way. They say that opposites attract, that opposites make for a strong attraction—well, perhaps that is true too. Slappy was the gentle giant with a heart of gold, and Rose was a pretty little thing who liked to wear flowers in her hair and wear lovely smelling cotton dresses (she had made herself) with flower prints on them. You could hold

Rose's delicate hands, look into her eyes, and truly get lost in the depth of her beauty. Their romance was exclusive and strong all through the semester in school that year. The semester was Slappy's last, he had gone as far as tenth grade, and now his father needed him full time on the farm.

The bloom of their romance was truly something beautiful to behold. They would talk together for hours and sit silent for hours too. They would watch the sky at night for falling stars and listen to the crickets near the pond. Slappy was never lusty with her, but they would hold hands and kiss in the moonlight, watching stars streak across the night sky. They were falling deeply in love. They were real happy together, and they avowed that they were going to get married. They talked about it a lot, when they were going to get married, and where they were going to get married, and how they were going to have two children, named Michael and Emily, and how they would have a small farm and raise horses for horse racing. All of their dreaming involved loving and happiness. When school let out, Slappy would usually arrange to be in the area and meet Rose, and they would go to grassy fields and lay down in the grass, holding hands and looking up at the clouds transforming, then at sunset, they would watch the sun relinquish its hold on the day in a splendor of color, then at stars streaking across the dusky sky. They decided that they would get married in Vegas. Slappy had been saving and had about \$1,200—more than enough to buy a ring and pay a preacher and start their lives together afresh. He and Rose talked extensively about

timing, their happiness could not wait, and they decided to wait until school was out for Rose, which was about two weeks away, then leave for Vegas and get married. Slappy just had one hurdle yet: to tell Rose's pa about the arrangement and seek his daughter's hand in marriage.

Slappy thought about Rose all the time, from the moment he woke up in the morning until the moment he closed his eyes, and then he dreamed of her. The next day he got up his nerve, put on a clean pair of overalls, and while Rose was in school went calling at Rose's ma and pa's place. Their place was in bad need of paint, or whitewash at least, and there were busted-up furrows and plows that had sunk halfway into the ground over years of not moving anywhere. Slappy knocked on the door. The faded plank door cracked open a slit, and a small woman dressed in a grey apron answered the door. Her eyes narrowed as she tried to make sense of the large figure standing outside in the bright sunshine. Slappy managed to stammer that he loved Rose and that they were boyfriend and girlfriend and he had honorable intentions for her. Rose's ma didn't say much. Her mouth tightened, and she opened the door so Slappy could come in and bade him to sit in the living room until Rose's pa came home for lunch. The house was very tiny, and there was faded floral wallpaper on the walls. Slappy sat on the edge of a white and blue faded tweed couch. Rose's ma said he'd best wait there until her husband came back from work for lunch, and they could talk about it man to man. Rose's ma continued her business about the house, and no words

were spoken. It was hot in the house too, and before too long he was sweating from underneath his armpits, then from his face, forehead, and neck. Rose's ma was cooking something on the stove that smelled good but got the house even hotter. He mopped his brow with a hankie, unsure what was worse, the heat of the house or the fear building in him on Rose's pa coming home for lunch. He thought several times to get up and make an excuse to leave, but he was here now, and he was going to stick it out.

After what seemed like an eternity, a mellow popping noise of a Pontiac Stratochief drew closer to Rose's house then stopped. The popping engine of the car shut off, followed by the notch click of the hand brake being engaged. Footsteps, then the house door burst open and Rose's pa entered the house—a short but powerful man—and kissed his wife. Rose's ma withdrew a little bit and spoke softly, glancing in Slappy's direction. Rose's pa's face turned crimson red, and he turned and faced Slappy. With fists clenched at his sides, he thundered that he would beat Slappy to a pulp if he ever came near Rose again, and with that, grabbed him by the bib of his overalls and dragged and shook him across the floor and threw him out the door. Moments later, the door locked.

Slappy was a mix of emotions—shame, anger, sorrow, and hatred—as he walked the mile and a half back to his father's farm. He ran the scenario over and over again to try to figure out what he had done wrong. Even Pa noticed he was not himself that day. Slappy lay awake in this room that

night trying to come to terms with his emotions, and by daybreak realizing that his love for Rose was as strong as ever, and determined that he had to find out if she felt the same.

Slappy bathed, ate breakfast, and left on foot for the school. When he reached the school, he sat down with his back against the outside wall of the classroom that Rose was in. When school let out, he caught Rose's eye and with tears in her eyes she came running to him, relieved that he had come back. It looked like Rose had been hit several times, about the eye and the side of the head. She already had a nasty shiner. They clasped hands, strolled slowly in the direction of the pond, and talked about all that had transpired, and as the crickets chirped and the moon's reflection rippled on the pond, they realized more than ever that they had to run away and get married.

They planned to elope the very next day. Slappy would take the Mercury half ton and pick up Rose at school, right after it let out at 3:00 PM. Rose would pack two dresses with her and a dozen sandwiches. Slappy would take all the money he managed to save, and they would drive to Las Vegas and get married. Neither Slappy or Rose got much sleep that night as they ran the plan through their heads over and over again. It was a simple plan, not much could go wrong.

The next morning, the sunrise blazed blood red across Enoch and the eastern sky and lingered for what seemed to

be an eternity. Slappy sat on the edge of his bed with the blood red sun streaming in, painting his walls and staining his clothes. "Red in the morning," he uttered under his breath. Rain was in the forecast. He got dressed quickly and began his chores immediately so as not to raise any suspicion. Rose had done the same and had packed a lunch the night before and arranged the sandwiches and drinks into a bag. She also brought a couple of glasses and water in a thermos for what would likely be a long trip. She had also spent twenty-five dollars of her own money and purchased a sexy negligee for their first night together as husband and wife. As the first school bell tolled for the opening period, Rose was already inside the school putting her stuff away in her locker.

They kept thinking about it all day. Slappy had gone over a map he got at the Texaco at least a dozen times; Enoch, Utah to Las Vegas, Nevada—about 640 miles, or nine and three quarter hours, and two stops for gas. Rose hoped that what she had packed in her bag was going to be pretty for him. She wondered what her parents would say when they found out they were married. Would they stay in Las Vegas? They were both consumed with nervousness, and before they knew it, the time was approaching.

Slappy spent the morning doing odds and ends for Pa. Slappy heard the peal of the school bell for lunch (at 12:00 PM), then the 1:00 PM bell to signal resumption of classes. In the afternoon, Slappy worked diligently cleaning the Mercury both inside and out. It wasn't in the best shape, but it was

reliable. Still, he wanted it to be clean. Slappy had withdrawn all the money he had from the bank and put it in his wallet. Finally it was time. He asked Pa if he could borrow the truck to pick up Rose and maybe see a movie in Parowan that afternoon. Pa hesitated, but Slappy had been a good help that day and Pa consented. It was cool and misty when Slappy got into the Mercury and drove into town and toward the school. Rose was waiting near the side door, looking innocent and gorgeous and smiling from ear to ear. When she saw him, she jumped in. They smiled each other, caressed each other's heads, and kissed passionately saying how they missed each other. Slappy put the Mercury in gear and left the parking lot heading for Las Vegas.

The excitement level was high in the truck. They talked about a myriad of different things as they hurtled down the interstate. They were driving into a relatively thick fog. The radio was playing "Mama Told Me (Not to Come)," by Three Dog Night. As they drove, a comfortable calm, a tranquil feeling, came over the cabin. Rose slid over and put her arm on his leg. Slappy put an arm around her shoulder. He smiled and felt pure bliss inside. The Mercury covered the miles easily, and soon they found themselves following a logging truck. Dusk was beginning to set too. Slappy turned on his lights and lit up the logging truck in front of him. The road had become quite sinuous, picking and winding its way through a hilly section of south west Utah. Rose instinctively moved her hand and stared intently at the road unfolding in front of them. Traffic was heavy in the opposite lane too.

Tractor trailers, transport haulers, logging trucks, and people heading to their varied destinations. Slappy was looking for a clear stretch that he could pass the truck ahead, especially on account of it slowing down to twenty miles an hour in the corners, but he had not yet had a chance to break for it. The cabin of the truck was beginning to fill with tension. Finally, Slappy could see a break in the oncoming traffic. He punched the gas pedal and pulled out. The Mercury's Y-block responded with a surge of power. What Slappy did not see was a logging truck in the foggy opposite lane that at that moment did not have its lights on. He saw it too late. Slappy stood on the brakes and clutch with both feet and headed for the opposite ditch to avoid a collision. Rose screamed. The truck tried to brake also, but at that moment a chain cinch weighing about twenty-five pounds broke free from the logging truck and hurtled toward the Mercury at a combined speed of over one hundred miles per hour. The cinch blew clear through the windshield and hit Rose in the head, cracking her skull clean open, killing her instantly. The Mercury hit the opposite ditch nose first, skidding, almost flipping over, and fell back with a metallic bang and abruptly stopped moving. Slappy had bitten his bottom lip nearly clean off, and he had instinctively grabbed Rose. There was blood everywhere.

The logging truck didn't even bother to stop. There was blood and brain and pieces of skull everywhere in the Mercury's cabin. Slappy held Rose's delicate face, broken in his hands, and he held her head to his beating heart. Blood

surged from Rose's head as her heart beat its last inside her broken body. He held her tightly. Their blood comingled and gathered in her lap. The gore of comingled blood consummated their marriage. As began cars stopping to see if they could help, they found Slappy covered head to toe in blood, holding Rose tightly, rocking back and forth, lips moving but making no sound. Eventually the police arrived and dispatched them to the hospital in separate ambulances to the closest hospital at Cedar City.

Now something like that is going to change somebody. It can't not. But when people change according to a thing that happens, there is a spectrum of ways that most people agree that a person would change. Well, Slappy changed in a way no one expected that he would. He spent several prescribed days in the hospital, got his lip sewn back together and receiving mandatory counseling and medication for the severe trauma that he had undergone. He refused to take any further medications. During counselling, Slappy refused to talk about the incident or Rose, leaving counsellors at a loss of how to help him. After three days, he was evaluated and released from the hospital. Ma and Pa picked him up in the car and drove back to Enoch. The Mercury was towed back to the farm in Enoch. Slappy remained pretty much catatonic. He did not go to Rose's funeral (although he probably wasn't welcome anyway), and became very withdrawn, avoiding contact with his ma and pa and virtually anyone else. Pa had approached Slappy on a couple of occasions to see if he could help him, and Slappy

would just look down at his feet and shook his head no. "All right then, Slappy, if you need anything . . ." and Pa would leave Slappy to be alone with his thoughts. He would often walk to the pond where he and Rose had spent time together dreaming, planning, and loving. He would look over the pond's quiet surface, especially in the morning when the first early sun blazed across its surface and utter her name—Rose. "Red sun in the morning," he would mutter at sunrise. He sat down among the tall grass and let Rose's vision fill his mind, and tears ran down his cheeks.

On a particular occasion, Ma and Pa were two towns over at a country fair. They had taken the car, on account that the Mercury had been garaged with a busted windshield and smashed front end since the accident. Slappy was at the public pool in town, probably recounting memories of Rose in his head, but stood up abruptly and began to briskly walk back to the farmhouse. In twenty-five minutes, Slappy was back at the farmhouse. He went inside, took a laundry basket, and filled it with bed sheets, towels, and hand cloths. With the basket full, he went into the garage and put the basket down. It was dark inside the garage. There was a window in the garage, but it was dirty and opaque with age. He took the bed sheets and began ripping them into narrow strips. He moistened the strips with water, and packed the strips around the garage door, the regular access door, and any place there was light (and thus fresh air) coming into the garage. He did a twice over and a third over to ensure the garage was airtight. He had Rose on his mind all right,

because he kept chanting “Rose” throughout the whole procedure. The whole process took about half an hour, and he was ready. He had with him a picture of Rose that she had given him shortly after they had first met. It was the only picture of her he had.

He opened the door of the truck and climbed in. The smell of death first hit him. Putrid, sour, stiff, and pervading. He climbed in. He held onto the steering wheel with both hands, it was covered with dried blood that felt like sandpaper. Once in, he put his head on his hands and let out a long low breath—“Rose.” Technicolor memories were set off by the odors and ambiance of the truck. He sat in that position for three or four minutes, contemplating, remembering, and thinking. Finally, he raised his head off the wheel and ran his finger slowly around the edges of the jagged hole left by the instrument of death that hurtled through the windshield. He ran his fingers over the quantities of dried blood that had soaked and dried in the back and bench part of the seat that had darkened and hardened the fabric. That was Rose’s life essence, her desire to live, their future together. Slappy was going to make their future together.

He tucked Rose’s picture into his front pocket, next to his heart. With a driving sense of purpose, Slappy put the key into the Mercury’s ignition, pulled the door shut, and turned over the engine until it started. The Mercury’s Y-block roared to life and responded instantly whenever Slappy gave it gas. “We’ll meet again soon, Rose,” Slappy assured himself once

more. In moments, the familiar exhaust smell of walnuts and brown sugar filled the air in the garage. Slappy leaned back in his seat, deeply breathed the fumes and uttered, "Rose" over and over again. He clutched the picture of Rose to his chest. He made sure the maps were tidy, tucked under the sun visor. He closed his eyes and imagined the two of them on the highway to Vegas again—a flash in Rose's eye and a glint in Slappy's. He held the smooth gearshift and rowed through the gears. In Slappy's mind, the Mercury was steadily mowing down the miles between home and their future that would begin with their marriage in Vegas. He looked over at Rose and loved her with every part of his being. Rose was beautiful. She winked at him and blew him a kiss and went back to watching the road. He looked into the rearview mirror. The blacktop lengthened way out behind them further than the eye could see, and cars went by slowly and silently, red ones, yellow ones and blue ones. Cars in the opposite lane would glide by silently, and stretch and lengthen out, leaving a comet trail behind as they passed the truck. The road was straight and went on forever. Slappy felt great.

The carbon monoxide put Slappy to sleep with malignant intent, like an enemy guardsman hooded and breaking the neck of his victim silently, so there would be no sound to give himself away. The Mercury continued to run flawlessly as it was designed to, impassive in the act of life it was taking. Pa and Ma arrived back at the house about five minutes after Slappy passed out. Pa pretty much

immediately figured out what was going on and kicked in the access door to the garage, turned off the truck, and dragged Slappy outside. He was barely breathing, and was cold and purple as Ma went to call 911 for an ambulance. Pa laid him out on the lawn and looked at him helplessly, his boy, his only boy; he was breathing very shallowly, and tears were streaming down Pa's weathered face. He began CPR on his son; Slappy's lips were cold and sweet, his eyes were rolled up into the back of his head.

The ambulance arrived within fifteen minutes, and the paramedics administered oxygen and took Slappy off to the hospital. During the ride to the hospital, Slappy's vital signs were taken, and they were not good. At the hospital, Slappy was admitted to the ER and his blood chemistry monitored. He was put on pure oxygen to breathe. There wasn't much that could be done. When Ma and Pa came to talk to the doctor, the news was not good. There had been brain damage, likely massive mental damage, how much only time would tell. Slappy, the doctors related, should he survive, would have the IQ of a vegetable. At this metaphor, Ma broke down, Pa held her crying in his arms, and Slappy lay in a coma. Slappy remained comatose for several days, and when he did come out, he was pretty much like the doctors predicted.

After a week of "stabilization," the hospital discharged Slappy. Part of that time was consumed in learning how to feed and care for an invalid. An option Ma had turned down was to have her son committed to a facility that is built to

accommodate such people. Ma insisted on taking care of her son. Ma and Pa took Slappy home, and with a wheelchair, began trying to establish a routine. It was difficult to adopt any kind of a routine, Slappy could not remember a thought for more than ten seconds. But Ma and Sally managed to enforce a routine of sorts. Slappy could stand and shuffle, but was completely incontinent. He required complete and full-time care. Slappy couldn't talk or tell when he was hungry, when he was tired, what he wanted to watch on TV, what he remembered doing five minutes ago, or when he had to go to the bathroom. Caring for Slappy was a true labor of love. Ma and Pa both aged decades beyond their years. Pa worked the farm obsessively, Ma and Sally tended to Slappy's every need. Sally's youth was stolen away. And the seasons slipped by, and the business of life doggedly pushed forward. There was no glory in it. No joy in it. No delight. Slappy would have been better off dead.

Storms, however, were still wired into what was left of Slappy's brain. On most occasions, when a storm would come, Ma and Sally would lock the door to prevent him from going outside. Slappy would usually watch the storm from the kitchen window, his mouth drooling on the glass, and by the time the storm had passed, Slappy had usually pissed himself or worse. During the month of August this particular summer season, the weather was right for storms, and there had been many. On the evening of this particular occasion, Slappy could feel a storm coming from way off. It had been sweltering hot all day, and the front and back doors had

been left open to let a breeze flow through the house. Ma had fallen asleep in a chair with a book on her lap in the corner of Slappy's room. It was about four o'clock in the morning, and Slappy's eyes snapped open. It was the electrical smell of ozone preceding the storm that he smelled, that he felt. Silently, Slappy shuffled outside. He dragged a lawn chair into the center of the lawn and sat down. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He could smell the valley far away in Minersville. He tore off his pajamas and his underwear and sat back down.

He could see the she-devil rolling down the valley, he could see the lightning, he could smell her sweet ozone oozing out of the very air he breathed. The blood drained from his legs, his skin was replaced with gooseflesh. He shuddered and breathed in sharply. As the storm made her way down the valley, it thundered off the valley walls and a cold wind blew across the valley floor like a welcoming mat laying prostrate at the sacred event of her coming. Slappy closed his eyes and waited. An image of a pretty young girl, with resplendent dark hair, sapphire blue eyes, and sweet perfume filled his mind, and although he tried, he couldn't remember her name. The storm was close now. He could hear the first whisks of wind molest the wind chime, the willow tree, the bird feeder. Water drops followed, few in number, large and small; artillery, crushing a leaf here, toppling a plastic cup on the picnic table, nailing the roof gutter. In an amazingly few seconds, the storm arrived with mercurial winds, driving rain, lightning, and thunder.

Slappy held his arms out in crucifixion form and the storm crushed him, *contriturating*<sup>1</sup> him to the chair with wind and black rain. It was jet black, and not even the outline of the house could be seen; the wind pummeled the willow tree and all the other trees in the yard. Lightning crashed, and a pure white bolt of electricity had struck Slappy, driving clean through his shoulder and traveled down through his body and into the ground. He was standing, with one hand in the air and one hand around an imaginary bride. It was if they were dancing. He looked into the face of his phantom bride with an expression of ecstasy, unable to move, frozen by the voltage. The way he was sculpted, the might, the force—his six foot two Olympian physique frozen in the dance of electrocution; to look at him, one could not help but gasp at the beauty that was his. The lightning went out and a heavy almost liquid ozone filled the air, and it was pitch black again. The wind seemed to sing a wedding prelude. The next time lightning erupted, Slappy was collapsed in his lawn chair, dead. The electricity had caused him to sexually discharge, and the current had orgasmically comingled with the fluids and secretions consummating their union.

The next day Slappy was gone. Ma and Pa looked high and low for him but couldn't find a trace. The storm had washed away any trace what had happened during the night. No one ever knew what happened to him. One thing can be said. Sometimes, it's the purest of people that the world disdains. And it's those cherished few who are denied lasting happiness.

Storms still roll down the valley from Minerville to Enoch. Sometimes if you close your eyes and are real quiet when a storm is approaching, you can hear the intoxicating sound of a girl's sweet laughter.



## Chapter 2

*You said you'd wait forever,*

*I would have waited more.*

*Your promise turned out to be never,*

*Your locket I still wore*

### The Bag Lady

Nearly everybody knew of her, most had seen her, this bag lady, in a different context a lifetime ago. She had been beautiful, well liked and respected in the community. Now, most people looked at her from a distance, but gave only a sidewise glance at her as they passed her. She never asked for money, so most people pitied her. As her station in life changed, who she was remained the same, but now she had become a shadowy fixture of society's lowest echelon. In these ranks, society discards the possibility that such people can contribute anything to society, in fact the opposite is the case; it is assumed the existence of such souls tear apart the fabric of decent society. Nobody looks beyond the circumstance and sees a human soul. No one acknowledges the presence of humanity.

She could have been fifty, sixty or eighty, her age was difficult to guess on account that her face had been terribly burned. She had extensive burning of her ears, such that small, hard, cashew shapes were the only features left. Her whole face had the texture and appearance of a walnut.

While she had been exposed to the fire, her skin had liquefied and her eyelids had run and partially fused with the lower lids. This made it difficult for her to blink and close her eyes completely. Her lips had been badly exposed, and she could not fully close her mouth. She wore a wig to disguise the mangy tufts of hair that were left on her tortoise shell scalp. She looked to be in constant pain. On this particular day, it was very cold, with a thin, heartless wind wailing from the North. Snow crystals filled the air. She wore what looked to be many layers of clothing—a couple of pairs of sweat pants and a tattered skirt, several sweaters and a filthy black felt coat. A ragged scarf was wrapped several times around her neck. She wore a single pair of woolen gloves. She pushed a shopping cart with wobbly wheels, and it was filled with bottles and cans and other odds and ends—an umbrella, a transistor radio, a porcelain doll whose eyes would not close, an old camera, a broken cell phone, some apples, a flashlight, a lantern, a Coleman heater, a small propane cylinder, some twine, a red blanket, a blue blanket, and some plastic shopping bags that appeared to be filled with air. She resolutely pushed the shopping cart down the downtown street, looking in garbage cans for bottles and other recyclables. She squinted into the wind, and because she could not close her eyes completely, tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. Remarkably, behind her followed at least half a dozen children. They were obviously homeless and probably ranged in age from five to fifteen years of age. The children were equally poorly dressed and scattered out to share in the work of looking in

garbage cans for bottles and tins and anything else of value. It was a sight that could not be comprehended. It looked more like a scene that would have been described in a Dickens novel—*Oliver Twist*. But then after the “compensation” measures, civil unrest, and activities of the ongoing occupational war resistance, child welfare had fallen off the radar, and scenes like this and worse were not uncommon.

During the worst global recession on record, between 2009 to 2012, the world’s leaders tried to spend their way out of the recession. The recession turned into a depression, popularly referred to as “Depression 2.0”. Obama was elected in 2008 on a platform of political accountability and promises of ending wars that were killing Americans in Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. He was even awarded the Nobel Prize for peace in 2009. The depression hit Obama and other world leaders straight in the gut. From what had been an unprecedented period of economic prosperity, things crashed and they crashed hard. The initial financial crisis was linked to unsustainable lending practices brought about by deregulation and over valuation of real estate mortgages in the US. It began from there and quickly affected the whole world, with stock exchanges losing 30, 50 and 90 percent of their wealth. Banks collapsed, the auto industry flatlined, big names like GM and Chrysler went bankrupt. G.E. went bankrupt as did S.C. Johnson, IBM and Microsoft. Then globally, names like BMW, Toyota and Nissan flatlined. Global energy producers such as BP and

Shell went bankrupt. Obama, then McKenzie tried break the downward spiral and gave billions in loans to the major car manufacturers and other large sectors of the economy. Banks and other lending institutions were similarly given large bailout loans. It seemed to the US (and other once prosperous countries) that it should be possible to spend their way out of the depression.

The economies did respond initially, but the cycle slowly continued its downward spiral as government and world leaders realized that spending could not revive what had become economic carcasses and societal despair. The US continued to print money, and China was one of the few willing to back the dollars. China, on the other hand, continued to grow its economy, based primarily on momentum and sheer numbers of people. China's bursting population of 1.5 billion people in 2015 and a resurgence in communist thinking combined to cause China to demand payment for the US money that it backed. The US economy had only continued to decline. The once mighty economy that manufactured, invented, grew, built and employed was outsourced, and bit by bit, the country stood back and watched it fall. Resource based economies fared slightly better, and Canada's forestry industry continued to harvest unchecked, based on demand from the Pacific Rim. The twisting, cracking and falling of trees mimicked the global economy. The odor of pine and dying wood filling the air, sap silencing and entombing the intricate workings of the economy, suffocating it. In short, the US was not able to

make good on the trillions of dollars of US debt that China held. China called in their loans, and the US was not able to make good. Negotiations followed, and the world came as close to the brink of World War III as it did during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The US really had nothing that China wanted—they already held the US economy in their hand. The US was tapped out by continuous sustained wars in the Middle East; in addition to the toll this took on the economy, it left them effectively defenseless. What the Chinese wanted was a fast track to upgrade their standard of living. In short, the Chinese wanted land belonging to the United States of America. This of course was deemed unacceptable to the US, but China controlled the US economy and had amassed an arsenal of weaponry almost equal to the US in quality and destructive power. So the unthinkable had to happen. The then president of the United States of America bargained with China using US land. The first state to be negotiated away to the Chinese was Michigan. Terms were basically that the state would be “shared” and unlimited in terms of immigration for the Chinese and that the Chinese could consider it “their soil.”

There was massive backlash from the American people, and well-armed US rebel forces formed and launched attacks against the influx of yellow hordes. The US military had the dubious distinction of enforcing the parameters of the treaty, but many army units broke off and formed a resistance to the occupying Chinese. It didn't end with

Michigan. Kentucky followed, Utah, Louisiana, North and South Dakota, and New Mexico were bargained away. The results were brutal battles against the occupying Chinese. After the debt was "settled," China owned fully two-thirds of the US. The battles raged across the country, and much of the country took on the appearance of a post apocalyptic, war-torn land. There were mass exoduses of people from states that had been declared "Chinese holdings" to those few states that were still American. Most people lost their savings and their wealth, leaving businesses and homes forfeit behind.

Violet had been a research biologist, clever in her research and quite lovely with long blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes. She had married her high school sweetheart who became a very successful investment banker. They had two charming children and a lovely home. They were living the American Dream in Charleston, South Carolina, one of the states that was later traded to the Chinese. When the Chinese came, they took over office buildings, homes, stores, farms, whatever they could get their hands on. Americans fought back. It was like fighting a phantom army. Where one Chinese was killed, two took his place. They came and occupied by sheer numbers of people. There was no diplomatic process for the transition to follow. Only a bloody means to an end. The American resistance was strong, with battles being waged with the Chinese by breakaway factions of the Marines, Air Force, and Navy using tactical maneuvers and modern weaponry, and by coalitions

of citizens, well-armed residents that were using personal firearms, homemade bombs—anything they could get their hands on. One of these grassroots factions was armed with homemade napalm and World War II era mustard gas. Violet and her family were caught in a vicious crossfire between the rebel soldiers and a Chinese detail. In the resulting violence that followed, Violet's husband and children were killed by Chinese grenade fire. Violet suffered third degree burns over 90 percent of her body when napalm was fired back at the Chinese, and her house was burned down. With her family dead, she debated whether or not to stay and die in the crossfire, but instead she threw blankets upon herself and, screaming, ran toward the American fighters. A marine detail grabbed the frightened woman and administered first aid. She was taken to a fortified building being used as a medical facility and treated as best as possible for the burns that she received.

She did not have time to recover. Within weeks the structure was discovered and destroyed. She was grouped with a number of "refugees" and put on a freight train boxcar that was heading north. She and the others got off in Billings, Montana, where there was promise of lesser violence and an ability to start again. She was beyond grief and beyond despair. The economy was limited in scope, with staples such as food, paper, cigarettes, gasoline, marijuana and alcohol being the focus of the local economy. There were several depraved gangs just in her "neighborhood," gangs that would kill for the clothing on

your back or for the sandwich you were eating. Billings had grown quickly, unsustainably, from just over a million to at least two million. It grew on account that it remained somewhat contiguous with remaining American states, crime was supposed to be lower, and opportunity greater. Industry in Billings was simple—clothes making, some farming and agriculture around the city, mechanical services, repair services of all kinds, and the importation of drugs and other contraband.

Violet tried to set up a baked potato and corn stand, but frankly she was too ugly, and people shunned her as if her appearance was contagious. The attractiveness that was Violet slowly grew over with the pall of a contagious disease. Where she used to be so outgoing, she found she withdrew to avoid emotional scarring before it could be hurled at her. So Violet gradually became a bag lady. Day by day, layer by layer, she became the bag lady. She had a kind and empathetic heart, and she had an uncanny ability to channel pain and feel the state of mind of another person. She knew it was a gift but did not know what to do with it. It would chill her when she encountered a person with great pain. She helped wayward children she came across, helping lost children find their way home, and other agencies such as the Salvation Army that could help them. There were a few children, however, that for various reasons, did not have any options. Violet took these innocents under her wing, and they became an unlikely family.

It had taken Violet several months, but she and the children found a warm and relatively safe place to call home and sleep at night. It was almost impossible to discover. Between two four story buildings about two feet apart, metal sheeting that clad the whole front of the strip mall was loose at one spot. Pulling it gently aside, there was a thin path between the two buildings that led to the back alley. You could go down the thin path to the end, and that's where it looked like it ended, but seven feet up, the path climbed parallel to the back of the buildings and more steel covered a hole that covered the entrance to a concrete room about ten-by-ten feet. The room was probably a food or ale storage room at some point but had long been forgotten about. They kept a small ladder hidden to access the upper path that led to the room. There were a couple of restaurants nearby, and sometimes food could be found in the dumpsters. Warm air from one of the restaurants found its way into the ten-by-ten-foot space. The room was safe, secure, and cozy. Countless clear bags, like balloons filled with helium, floated against the ceiling. The bags gave off a dim light, so there was always some light in the room. They had a white gas light, heater, and stove. There the ad hoc family stayed at night, sleeping on scavenged pillows and blankets, huddled together, eating what food they found or had purchased from the bottles and tins they were able to recycle. Violet felt good when the children were safe, but it also made her think of the family she had lost in the civil uprising. When she would think of what she had lost, tears would fill her eyes, and she would sob quietly. Because she

couldn't close her eyes completely, she would cover her eyes with a towel.

Most people knew of the Bag Lady, but few knew of the unique job that she performed in that community. During their travels, the Bag Lady and her children would traverse the streets looking for valuables to help in survival. Some of the children would disappear into shops, houses, and other buildings that people lived. The children would seek out the desperate, the mentally impoverished, the bereft, and those left living with no purpose in life. At night, they would squeeze through the maze that led them to their room. Violet would light the lamp and convert the heater into a stove and cook what they had scavenged in a large tin pot. Most of the children called her Nana. Nana always made sure that everyone got something to eat, and extra blankets and coats ensured that the ragtag "family" were warm. After everybody had had a chance to eat and drink, Nana would turn the lamp down low and begin to tell tales of the before times, of living in lovely houses and shopping in lovely stores. The youngest children's eyes would glow with fascination. The older children would sometimes talk about their families, some would cry, and Nana would comfort them. To the children, Nana was beautiful.

Caring for the children and expending love made Nana forget the horrors she had endured, if only for a little while. When the youngest children nodded off, Nana would make sure they were tucked in, and lower her voice even more and ask the older children if they had found anyone in need.

Sometimes they would relate a brief conversation they had had with somebody, and sometimes they would simply describe the pain the children observed being endured. Nana would sweep away a small area on the floor of the room, and would draw maps of the city in the dust to show where the most desperate of people were. When she was sure that the young children were asleep and safe, three or four of the older children would hold hands in a circle while she prayed, "We come tonight to do your will, so that those hearts who suffer can be still. To take agony away, that haunts you each and every day, and never again know dismay." They broke the circle, and Nana packed her bag with a propane cylinder filled with helium and a mask for administering anesthetic that she had picked up at a medical outpost. Nana would connect the hose from the anesthetic mask to the tank of helium and put it over the mouth and nose of a person. Turning it on, the helium prevented the suffering soul from feeling that he is suffocating and death would release him within minutes. It is considered a humane way to die.

The Bag Lady would get it filled in a "dollar store" that sold trinkets and food and helium for balloons. The shop was run by a Chinese lady who was American, but could not speak English. When Violet pointed to the helium and to her canister, the understanding was made and the shopkeeper would fill it up for her. At first, she looked into her eyes for the longest time. Violet, not being able to blink, just looked back. The Chinese lady took Violet's hands in hers and

peered deeply into her eyes. Tears filled her own eyes as she recalled her daughters being raped and killed in the uprising. She also had two sons in the wars and worried for their safety. She turned her back on Violet after giving her the helium. Ever since, she would get her propane canister of helium filled without charge and without looking at one another.

This evening, Nana and two of the children exited the room. Two of the children took her by the hands and led her down several streets, then to a wooden rooming house. They climbed the unlit stairs to the third floor, last house on the left, and tapped on the door. Shuffling could be heard inside. The chain could be heard being pulled back and the door opened a crack and an elderly man peered at the Bag Lady and the children. "Nana, his name is Barry," one of the children whispered in Violet's ear. Barry peered at her for a full minute and asked, "Are you the one?" "Yes," was Violet's reply. Tears filled Barry's eyes, and he began to shake. He opened the door wider. "Please come in," he said. The threesome entered the small apartment.

There were old newspapers everywhere, a gas mask, and some zucchinis on the kitchen table. A sole candle burned in the sitting area on a small wooden table beside a deteriorated easy chair. There was a small TV there, but there was likely no money to pay for electricity. "What do I do?" Barry asked. Violet suggested that he sit and relax in his easy chair. "Tell me about your life," Violet whispered and listened to a tale of sorrow and pain, and of

hopelessness and agony. Barry had not only lost everything he had but he had cancer as well and had but months to live. Violet stroked his thinning hair and smiled at him. "You are resplendent like an angel," Barry said, his eyes lit up—. "Barry," Violet asked, "are you ready?" Tears filled Barry's eyes and he nodded. "Is this what you want?" Again Barry, overcome with emotion, nodded his head yes. Violet removed the facemask from her handbag and placed it over Barry's mouth and nose. It had a hose running to the helium bottle and a clear bag to catch the expelled helium. Violet whispered, "This won't hurt, Barry, and it will release you from your pain." Barry nodded his head again, and one of the children held Barry's hands. He grasped them tightly. Violet uttered, "Dear Lord, we commit Barry unto your loving arms. May he experience no more pain, and be with you in your full Glory now and forever." The other child held the mask on Barry's face, and Violet turned on the nozzle of the helium tank on and the mask filled with helium. Barry breathed deeply and normally. A smile crossed Barry's lips and his eyes closed as he was seeing happy thoughts. Barry's grip on the child's hand loosened, and Violet very carefully removed the bag from the mask and tied a knot in it so that the helium and any part of Barry's soul would not escape. Violet let his head rest on the back of his easy chair. He had a look of bliss upon his face. The children held open the kit bag, and she carefully put the helium-filled bag into it. Violet needed several minutes to rest after performing the suicide.

They slipped out of the apartment after covering him up and descended down the narrow unlit staircase. Beany (one of the children) knew the next location, and she took her hand and grasped Nana's. Beany had an uncanny ability to find people in pain. Willy (the other child) followed close behind. They traveled darkened streets for nearly an hour and came to a dark ramshackle fruit stand. Beany led them around the back of the store and knocked quietly at the door. The door opened immediately and there stood a young Muslim man, tears still wet on his cheeks. He beckoned them in and Beany whispered in Nana's ear that the man's name was Aalim. His name meant "Religious Scholar." Aalim went to a darkened corner of his store and sat on a wooden fruit box and resumed crying. Nana and the children respectfully waited for Aalim's emotions to stabilize. Soon he spoke between sobs, "I came to this country to fight a great evil, to kill, and now I realize that great evil is in all men's hearts." He pounded his chest. "Even in here!" he shouted. He continued, "I killed thirty-eight, three were children. I came to fight evil only to see evil in every heart. In my own heart, I hate, I hate all men, for all men hate each other. I have *the* most evil of all in *my heart*." He resumed crying, taking large uncontrollable sobs.

Nana and the children approached him closer. Nana gently removed her woolen gloves and softly held Aalim's hands. She looked into his eyes, they were brown and full of anger. Aalim looked at Violet's hands then into her face, and in a softer voice said "You have seen much pain, much

sorrow." "Yes," Violet replied, "I have. What do you want to do?" she whispered. "Amatullah<sup>2</sup>, I want to go to Jannah<sup>3</sup>, to be released from all of this pain," Aalim said. He continued in a murmur, "I have killed people, good people, because they were not Muslim." "Let Allah judge," Violet said. "I am ready," Aalim said. "Come, come and lay down," Violet said, and the children took him by his hands and led him to his cot near the back of the store. "I want to give you something for this," Aalim said. Violet put a finger on his lips. "Are you ready?" Violet asked. Aalim closed his eyes and nodded. Violet gently put the mask over his nose and mouth, and one child held it snug. Violet whispered, "Aalim, may Allah our great father receive your soul tonight and may you be released from your pain." Violet released the helium into the mask. Aalim took several long deep breaths then was gone. The tension that had run through his body was gone and his face was peaceful. Again Violet took off the bag carefully and tied a knot in it so the helium would not escape. The children held the kit bag open, and she placed the bag beside Barry's.

Nana and the two children took several hours to make it back home to their snug room a couple of hours before morning. Violet and the children were always glad to get back to the relative safety of the room. It was warm inside and the children were safe. Nana would open the kit bag and take out the lives that were taken by the helium and let them float up to the ceiling. She was tired, and because she could not close her eyes fully, she fell asleep looking at the

peaceful glow of hundreds of spirits inside the bags floating up against the ceiling. Even when the lantern was fully out, the ceiling was phosphorescent, and the lights would move. It was as if looking at a starry night with a full moon from underneath the water. It was very comforting. Sometimes one of the children would sneak in and cuddle with Nana. “Why do the lights move and change colors on the ceiling?” “Because they are the souls of people, and all people are different and all souls are different. Some are brighter, and some are a different color. Some are restless and move about,” Nana would say.

None of the lives released had ever been identified as “murders,” or even if they had been, the fabric of the law was not sufficient to investigate such incidents. Bodies, when they were found, were usually gathered up and thrown together with bodies regularly found in the streets—victims of the ongoing race wars—and were either mass buried or burned.

As the next day broke, the children were hungry and Nana cooked some of the food she had carefully kept inside the room. They had bacon, scrambled eggs, and dark bread. They ate using a collection of dishes and cutlery they had gathered in their travels. They had a jug of orange juice to share. On this day, the clan ventured out and went about gathering valuables that could be traded for food and other staples. They collected bottles and tins, and the children were given change by passersby’s on the street. Cindy, Eddie, and Phoebe, who were roughly eight to twelve years old,

disappeared inside buildings looking for the destitute. Often the children would come back and inform Nana that they had found a person who was hungry and needed food. Nana would carefully select some of the food she had gathered and send the children in with it. Even in this infrastructure of war and a delicate economy, there were agencies (primarily the Salvation Army) dedicated to helping the hungry. Violet would create a sign on a red piece of paper drawing the Salvation Army sign and writing, "Food desperately needed," and affix it on the door. She would then check on the people during her forays to ensure that they were getting what they needed to survive.

One day, during their routine, Phoebe came rushing out of a shelled apartment building. As was usually the custom, she whispered details in Nana's ear first. Nana's face, although burnt, seemed to wrinkle with emotion. The clan hurriedly finished up the scavenging efforts and went back into their room. They lit the lantern and the heater, but Nana seemed distant, thinking. They had a meal that night of ground pork, potatoes, and tea. As it began to grow darker outside, Nana gathered the older children into a circle, and in low murmurs began to talk about the plan for the evening. Nana, Phoebe, Willy, and Eddie squeezed out of the room. Phoebe had an extraordinary ability to empathize with people through touching them or holding their hands.

The night was dark. They walked quickly and silently to the apartment complex. Phoebe told them the elevator did not work and that they needed to go to the ninth floor, so

they silently made their way up the stairs to the ninth floor. There were no lights on in the hallway, but Phoebe headed directly for apartment 904. Nana and Willy caught up. Inside could be heard crashing noises and shrieks. Nana knocked softly at the door. The sound inside the apartment stopped. Nana knocked again. Footsteps could be heard and the door opened. A woman no more than thirty-five answered the door. She stared at the foursome for several minutes and finally turned her back leaving the door opened. The four entered. Inside, the apartment was a shambles. Broken glass, overturned chairs, and on the living room floor, a man lay dead with a butcher knife stuck in his back.

The woman came out from the kitchen area with a tumbler full of scotch and downed it in three or four swallows. Three chairs were set upright and Nana, Phoebe and the woman sat. "What the hell happened to you?" the woman asked looking directly at Violet. "I was given a job to perform," Violet replied. "Well, holy shit," the woman said. "What happened here?" Violet asked. "Well," the woman replied, "my husband cheated on me, with someone fifteen years younger." "Tell me what you want," Violet said, and leaning into Phoebe's ear, "Hold her hands." Phoebe got down on her knees and held the woman's hands. "I want to die, because I don't want to live anymore. I've killed my husband. I'll be found out eventually and either be shot or assigned to a work detail. I just want to die." Violet listened intently. Phoebe whispered in Nana's ear. Violet, rising from her chair, addressed the woman, "I'm sorry, but we cannot

help you.” “Why you *bitches!*” the woman went on and grabbed a knife from near the kitchen table. She swung the knife wildly while Violet and the children backed away. Eddie who was fourteen desperately went to grab a chair to defend himself but fell, and the woman was quick to cut off his left ear. He put his hand to his head instinctively. Phoebe screamed running to Eddie, and the crazed woman slashed a cut clean through Phoebe’s cheek. Nana was trying to get between the woman and the children, but Willy who was twelve swung with all his might and hit the woman in the temple with an empty wine bottle. It smashed into a thousand pieces. She went down.

Nana was screaming to get out of the apartment and pulling the children toward the door while Eddie desperately looked for his ear. He found it and slipped it in his pocket, and they left as fast as they could. Even in the dim light of the staircase, the grisly trail of Eddie’s and Phoebe’s blood could be seen. Nana kept the children in front of her and urged them along. All the while she kept shaking her head murmuring, “No, no, no.” Once they burst outside, they hurried to the sole street lamp that was burning on the street.

Eddie was rocking back and forth holding his hand to his head where his ear had been with tears streaming down his face. “Let me have a look, Eddie,” Nana said. She had to repeat this several times before he allowed her to move his hand away from the wound. Her lips tightened when she examined the ragged crater that was left of his ear. It was

still bleeding profusely. Nana reached into Eddie's pocket and drew out the ear and held it against where it had been severed. There may be a chance to reattach it, she thought. She wrapped the ear in plastic and put it into her kit bag. She took a Maxi Pad from her kit and used her scarf to hold it in place against the ear to help stem the bleeding. Next she looked at Phoebe. It was a nasty puncture wound to her cheek, but the bleeding had all but stopped. She would have a nasty scar there. They hurried back to the safety of the room, and Nana cleaned Eddie's ear with alcohol and sewed it back on. In two weeks, it turned black and fell off.

It had been three weeks since Nana and the children ventured out of their room to release anybody from their pain. Nana talked to the older children about it. Eddie was bitter about losing his ear and wanted to go back to the woman's apartment and take her life. Nana explained that it was up to God who gets chosen and who does not. Willy and Phoebe felt they were ready. At night, when the lantern was extinguished, the children would fall asleep, and Nana would look at the bags floating on the ceiling, the lights dancing like the aurora borealis. When she tried to close her eyes, her head would fill with cries for help and people pleading to be released from their misery. She would sob without making a sound, cover her ear holes with her hands, but the pleading never stopped. The voices called her by name. She would drop off to sleep with the voices in her head and images of souls that she had released and souls she had never seen. When she woke up, she wondered if

she was going crazy. But when the room brightened a bit as light began to shine through cracks in the ceiling of the cement room, it signaled that morning had come, and there were seven hungry children to look after. With the extra brightness in the room, she couldn't even see the bags glowing on the ceiling. Nana had found an old camping stove on a recent foray, and it was perfect for making meals. She made scrambled eggs with discarded eggs that had one or two broken in the carton, bread and bacon that had just gone beyond its expiry date, all from behind a food store dumpster. The smell was exquisite. The clan enjoyed a delicious breakfast before heading out to scavenge.

Nana and Phoebe had become unusually close, but they did not talk much. Most of their communication was now unspoken. Words slowed them down, so they talked without words and with few gestures, sometimes with a nod of the head or a gesture with the hands, but that was it. They were walking in a seedy part of the downtown core. The Bag Lady and her kids were mostly respected by everyone in the area. They found some beer bottles and a dirty coat, and Phoebe went to look behind a dumpster. It was a hot day with flies buzzing about, and she came out and held Nana's hand and looked into her eyes. Nana called to the other children, and they followed her behind the dumpster. Laying against a fence in back of the dumpster was a man of about forty-five and extremely thin—his entire skeleton could be seen, brittle skin stretched over craggy bones. Flies buzzed all over his body, and there were open wounds and scabs they were

feeding on but he was too weak to swat them away. He wore no shirt and faded tight-fitting jeans that the pant legs were cut off above the knee. He was bald but had long strands of greasy hair around the edges of his head. The man was covered in quarter-sized white lesions all over his body.

Willy asked an obvious question, "Hey, mister, what are all those white dots all over your body?" He looked up at Willy, licked his lips and said, "It's cancer. I got AIDS. I'm gonna die." With that, he put his head back down, exhausted, and began to tremble. Willy took two steps back. "What is your name?" Nana asked. "Evan," he said, breathing heavily without looking up. "Tony was my best friend," Evan said, his voice quaking, "but he died three days ago. He had liver cancer. We didn't have no money to see no doctor, so he died right in the apartment." He looked up at the apartment with his eyes. There were tears streaming down his face, flies were all over him, even at the corners of his mouth. He continued, "I came out here because I didn't wanna die where Tony died." He cried in full sobs then was racked with coughing until blood came up. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

When the coughing stopped, he reached into his front pocket and produced a quarter full bag of dusty Drum tobacco. He opened the pouch and pulled out a package of Vogue papers and pulled one out. He tried to put tobacco on the paper but was trembling fiercely. "Let me help," Violet said. Violet rolled a cigarette for Evan and put it to her lips. She lit it for him with her lighter from her kit bag and passed

it back to Evan. Evan inhaled deeply and relaxed noticeably. "You must have loved him very much," Nana said, "Is there anything we can do for you? Are you hungry or thirsty?" He tipped his head up and looked at her. "You're the Bag Lady, aren't you?" he asked. "Yes," Nana replied. "I only want one thing in life," he sobbed, "and that's to die and be with Tony." They looked at each other for a long time. Finally Nana asked, "Are you sure you are ready? We can bring you medical help." "I'll be dead in a day or two anyway," Evan replied.

It had become very quiet. The other children were sitting silently in the grass, and the sun was setting, casting long shadows. Evan lay down in the soft grass. Phoebe gently put her hands on his head, and Nana put her hands on his chest. They both closed their eyes. All three were quiet. Then gradually all three started to breathe at the same rate and rhythm. "Evan," Nana whispered, "you are ready." Nana asked, "Evan, what do you want?" "To be released." Evan's lips hardly moved. Willy delicately brought the kit bag, and Nana got out the helium apparatus with the mask and clear bag. "Evan, this is your destiny," Nana said, and then she prayed with Phoebe without moving their lips or making any sounds. The mask was placed over Evan's mouth and nose. The children had all crept forward and had their hands lightly on Evan. "You are not alone," Nana said. Willy turned on the gas, and Evan breathed deeply and the bag filled quickly. Evan was dead within thirty seconds. Nana quickly detached the bag and knotted it and put it in her kit bag

along with her other supplies. Nana and the children left for home.

The engagement went on for many months and many years. One night Nana lay down looking at the ceiling. The others were sleeping. The light show was magnificent tonight. There were hundreds of sorrowful souls floating in the ten-by-ten-foot room. Some of the children had grown older and left and others had taken their place. There was more civil unrest with the Chinese as they pushed to take over parts of Montana. With the bleakness and war, little to eat and shitting in a pot, more anguish, madness, and fear was present than ever. To simply survive in the blocks outside was becoming insurmountable, whereas before, the red hand of war was out of grasping range, its fingers continued to stretch out ever further. The city was falling. There was no orderly means of evacuating the city—it seemed to happen ad hoc, as far as a car or bus would take you, then the rest by bicycle or foot.

There were many like Violet who stayed because they had nowhere and no way to go anywhere. It was taking a heavy toll on Violet too. She got little sleep and could hear the artillery fire waging war both near and far away. Food was scarce, and she struggled to keep the children alive. She missed her own children and husband and life she seemed to have lived a century ago. Hunting rats and hidden garden plots were borderline means to a miserable existence. Artillery shell explosions sounded closer. Violet wondered if she had actually done right by the children, offering them

*something*, when surely they would have died had she not taken them in. Perhaps their destiny would have been to die when she had found them and that would have been better. She thought of Eddie's ear being cut off and shook her head and bit her lip.

She looked up at the ceiling. It was a beautiful dance tonight, but it could just be her eyes. The children were all asleep. She thought about all the souls that she released from misery: did she have the right to do it? Surely she did. It *felt* like the right thing to do. There was another explosion, this time a couple of blocks away. She closed her eyes and thought of the hundreds she had helped: Myles the old man, Evan the sick young man, Stirling the painter, Henry the banker, Suzette the writer, Bill the carpenter, Megan the daycare operator, Lynn the baker, Peter the salesman, Lily the nurse, Anna the accountant, Yves the soldier, Lucille the doctor, Jack the thief, Jeremy the technician, Randy the car salesman, Debbie the doctor, Michael the deacon, and so on. When she opened her eyes, the ceiling was *resplendent* with light and blinding to look at, and the children waking up held their arms up against the light. The light grew more luminous and brilliant until the entire room was blazing; the souls were moving through it like thick soup.

Lightning crashed and there was an explosion that directly hit the tiny room. The explosion was blinding and deafening. The first moments of the explosion seemed like minutes, and an individual voice was heard separately by Nana and each child. It was almost peaceful. A hand

seemed to be touching their foreheads and asking, "Are you ready?" Each gave their own answer. Nana looked up into the light and replied, "Yes, I am ready." Willy replied, "Yes, I am ready." Philip replied, "Yes, I am ready." The aerial bomb had struck the small room and blown off the roof, but what the souls had been hiding all these years was a passageway to the next dimension. Now that passageway was open. Nana's breath was drawn out of her. Her soul exploded from her mouth as a brilliant white streak of energy. Within seconds she was dead. All the hundreds of souls exited as the bags disintegrated from the heat of the explosion. Nana and all the children in the room simply vanished. The exodus of souls was an immense blast of energy emanating from the room that lasted for a full five minutes. To look at it would be to witness all the memories, experiences, ecstasies, and horrors that were the essence of the souls who had been released from their bodies. The vision would be forever burned into your soul. When the exodus was complete, the portal closed and disappeared.

Chinese continued to fight Americans, and deaths occurred on both sides. Blood ran like rivers down the storm drains and disease spread misery to the humanity locked in an eternal death struggle. For some, the pain was so great that they would blow their brains out with a handgun in the middle of the street. Others would run down the sidewalk with a tattered US or Chinese flag and get shot to death in moments. The rats and cats seemed to enjoy the spectacle, but there was no joy. There was no escape. There is never

any escape from the dark side of humanity.

Phoebe woke up in an unfamiliar area of town. She wondered where she was. Then she remembered answering the voice that “she was not ready yet.” Nana’s kit was nearby, and there was a shopping cart halfway down the quiet block.



## Chapter 3

*You say that you know me,*

*Is this good for you?*

*If this doesn't fit, I can change who you see,*

*It's not really me, it's just a tattoo*

## Poles

Fadwa<sup>4</sup> and Michael met while studying late one night at the University of McGill in Montreal, Quebec. Michael was in his fourth year of an undergraduate medical degree, and Fadwa was in her fourth year of a bachelor's degree in commerce and was planning additional studies to become a lawyer. They were both taking an ethics course and were trying to locate the same rare resource in the university library. Michael had always been very shy around women and was very introverted in general. He came from a middle-class family and had a younger brother whom he was very close with. He had few friends, and not one of them would be considered a good friend. He had had a difficult upbringing. He had been brought up in one of the poorest neighborhoods of his hometown of Regina, Saskatchewan, and was the focus of bullying ever since he could remember going to school. Kids in his grade would beat up on him, and kids in other grades (higher grades with "bigger kids") would also beat up on him. It was paradoxical—the school's name was Our Lady of the Assumption Catholic School. How many

times he wished he could be “assumed” into heaven to escape the endless beatings and torment that were a part of his everyday school routine. He had a younger brother who suffered pretty much the same fate as he did but at a different school.

To make matters worse, Michael’s mother would dress him in clothing from second-hand stores, thrift stores, and surplus stores that offered fashion of decades gone by, and created another way for Michael to be a misfit. Kids are quick and cruel to exploit any avenue of abuse. One incident in particular that Michael could never forget was his mother coming home with a red snow jacket from the second-hand store. Michael looked it over, and surprisingly, aside from a weird crest sewn on the chest, it didn’t look too bad. He might be able to wear it and not attract the attention of the other kids. The next day, wearing his red jacket, getting off the bus at school and hanging around before the bell rang to signal the beginning of school, three kids came over to Michael. They were in the next higher grade. The middle one looked at Michael and his jacket and said, “That’s my jacket.” Michael assured him it was not, but the kid persisted, “Yes, it is. My mom took it to the Salvation Army because I grew out of it, and here look at this.” The kid grabbed the coat by the collar and pulled down the hood at the back. “There’s my name, Paul Braun, right there.” A crowd of kids had gathered at that point to watch the reveal. Laughter broke out all around him, and quickly the name “Red Shield Appeal” was made up for Michael.

Embarrassment, humiliation, and shame ran through Michael like red-hot pokers. Five or six of the kids grabbed Michael and hung him on top of the chain-link fence with his Salvation Army jacket. He had to wait for a teacher to lift him down.

Incidents like this and many others contributed to Michael lacking confident social skills that allowed him to effectively interact with his peers, and especially with girls. Sensing this from a young age, Michael and society mutually excluded each other. He lived on the fringe, always looking in, always filled with a desire to blend in and have normal carefree relationships with "friends." Any necessary foray into society, such as a school picnic, or worse, a school dance, a school play, or oral project presentation, would result in Michael being chewed up by the machine and spit out with deep flesh wounds, broken psyche, and psychological trauma to last a lifetime. Michael was a good man, however. He had been born with an innate sense of right and wrong. He was charitable and would help anyone in need, giving them the shirt off his back. He had tried with a good and pure heart to work with organizations like Meals On Wheels and homeless shelters, but even in these settings he was a social outcast from the echelons of the lowest classes of society. He resigned himself to the fact that he was a social outcast, and it tore his heart apart.

As Michael lacked social talent, he immersed himself into his studies and consistently got excellent marks. When he graduated from grade twelve, he strategically applied to

top universities, but chose McGill to put distance between his hometown and school—and to ensure he got a degree from one of the top universities in the country, and a fresh start.

He was in the library on this particular evening studying for an ethics exam and trying to locate a book required to address questions that were asked in an ethics assignment. Michael found the book in the library first, just as Fadwa was extending her hand to grasp it. Their eyes locked. Fadwa was wearing a dark brown jilbab<sup>5</sup> (body tunic) and matching dark brown hijab<sup>6</sup> (head covering). She had large brown eyes, full lips, and pale smooth skin. She looked away and smiled. An infectious energy seemed to radiate from her. Michael took the book and held it out to her, “Please, ladies first,” Michael offered. She looked down saying, “No, I couldn’t.” “Please,” Michael said, again offering the book. Fadwa looked up sheepishly with her big brown eyes, “We could share it,” she said. Michael caught scent of Fadwa’s perfume, an alluring blend of exotic spices and flowers; it was intoxicating and beautiful. “Sure,” was Michael’s reply, although he was terrified inside. He was never prepared for meeting and talking to women. Was he dressed all right? Were his pants clean? Was his hair combed? Was he perspiring? (Yes, he was.) Did he have to be selective in what he talked about to a Muslim? All these things were running through his head.

Fadwa went to her table with the book, and Michael brought his study materials and binders over. He sat across

from her. "My name is Michael," he managed, his voice quivering a bit, "I've seen you in class." "I'm Fadwa, pleased to meet you." She held out her hand. Michael shook her hand; her skin was soft, and her voice was pleasant and sweet. It put Michael at ease, and they began to talk about the class they were in and the professor and all manner of things. Michael was mesmerized by her and her soft brown eyes. The hijab seemed to frame her beautiful face. As the library closed, Fadwa got up and laughing, said, "I enjoyed studying with you, perhaps we should do it again?" Michael jumped out of his chair, grabbed her hand and said enthusiastically, "There is nothing I would enjoy more!"

Over the weeks, they became very good friends. Michael wasn't sure how much of a traditional friendship/relationship could be had with a Muslim girl, with him having a Christian background. They were both different, and this bonded them. There was a large Muslim community in Montreal, but Fadwa seemed to be more fascinated with Canadian culture and ethnology. "Don't you feel privileged to be a Canadian?" Fadwa asked Michael one evening. He replied that he did, but the question brought up the years of marginalization and how his fundamental humanity had starved in Canadian society. He thought how the past couple of weeks had been, having befriending this beautiful Muslim woman who did not judge him, who did not put him down, who did not persecute him. He felt giddy, anxious, and scared. It reminded him of a recurring dream he had as a child, where he was digging in a

garden of barren soil with withered and diseased crops. He had a wheelbarrow and a shovel. He was digging the dusty earth, turning the soil over looking for potatoes when he hit something solid. It was a diamond the size of a basketball. He hoisted the diamond into the wheelbarrow and covered it with some burlap sacks so no one would find out about his discovery. He pushed the wheelbarrow out of the garden and pushed it faster and faster until he crashed it into a crowd of people. The diamond flew out of the wheelbarrow and smashed into thousands of pieces on the ground.

Michael took Fadwa to many places in Montreal and surrounding areas so that she could enjoy Canada and experience Canadian ethnology. Michael still didn't really know how to proceed with Fadwa. He had no sense of timing and never knew what to say at the right time. Every day he saw her, every hour he spent with her was a gift. He had no idea of how to bridge the culture gap between them. As time slipped by, Fadwa's beauty had enveloped and captured Michael's soul.

While waiting for Fadwa, Michael was leaning against a tree watching the clouds go by when his eyes were covered from behind! "I see you, Michael!" Fadwa laughed, then Michael laughed, then giggling they went to the cafeteria for lunch and to catch up on what happened the past day or two. After they had eaten and parted ways, Michael felt deflated. He literally put all he had into time he had with Fadwa so the experience would be perfect, but when they parted, he always wanted more. He didn't even know if she had a

boyfriend to begin with. He could be expending all his effort for naught. He resolved to ask Fadwa if she had a boyfriend, or an arranged marriage, or some other insurmountable barrier.

Michael caught up with Fadwa outside of her finance class. "Carry your books?" Michael asked. "Why, what a gentleman!" Fadwa replied and gave her books to Michael, who carried them all under his right arm. Fadwa slowly reached over and held Michael's hand. Michael looked at Fadwa, and Fadwa smiled with her big ravishing eyes and ran her fingers through his hair. "My friends are asking questions," Fadwa started. They arrived at a food court and sat down. Fadwa continued, "They want to know how come I am spending time with a white boy, but a *handsome* white boy," she concluded, smiling. Michael looked at her and held her hand. For Michael, it was like holding precious gold. Fadwa continued, "It's because I like you. You are different, Michael. I like your gentleness, I like your kindness, I like that you are a gentleman, I like that you are smart." Michael was turning red, and he was short for words. "But I'm a Catholic, not a Muslim," Michael replied. Fadwa's eyes grew large. "Really?" Fadwa asked, shocked. Michael began to stutter an explanation, but Fadwa again held his hand and, giggling, whispered in his ear, "I'm only joking, silly." Michael had never seen Fadwa with a boyfriend, so he thought he would take the chance and ask. "Fadwa," Michael asked rather awkwardly, "do you have a Muslim program you must follow, that includes who you must see in

a significant other sense?" Fadwa's big brown eyes opened even wider, and she squeezed Michael's hands. "Of course not, silly." There was palpable relief at the table. Michael managed to stammer, "Fadwa, would you come for dinner and a movie with me on Friday night?" "I would love to, Michael," was her whispered reply. She caressed Michael's head and his arm. "You are my shining star, Michael," Fadwa said, looking into Michael's eyes with her beautiful brown eyes.

Michael researched extensively on the Internet over the next couple of days how their different upbringings were worlds apart. Michael learned of the significance of Muslim clothing, the religious rights, the importance of the Qur'an, belief in common prophets that are recognized in Catholicism and Islam. Michael learned the long vines of history that bore bitter fruit between the East (Muslim) and the West (Christian) religions. He learned about grassroots movements that recognized the similarities of the two worlds and worked tirelessly to seek an end to the violence. At the same time, Fadwa learned more of her father's plan for her. He wanted her to integrate into Western society as little as possible, but to take what she learned and return to their homeland where she would apply her knowledge in Muslim society. She found the idea of a lifetime of repression based on gender was less than savory to her. It strengthened her desire to remain in Canada where democracy ensures equality of all peoples. She wanted to become a Canadian citizen and planned to take the

appropriate steps toward making it happen.

Fadwa was sitting on the campus lawn, working on an assignment on her laptop, when behind her somebody covered her eyes! "I see you, Fadwa!" Fadwa started to giggle, "It isn't fair that I have my hijab that lets you find me quickly!" Michael laughed. "I would have found you by your laughter," Michael said, "We should leave by 6:45 to see the movie." They held hands as they walked to the train station, boarded, and rode the 165 to Eighty-third street. The couple drew furtive, curious stares. Fadwa instinctively held Michael's hand tighter. "It's OK, Fadwa," Michael reassured Fadwa. Fadwa and Michael got off at their stop. The sun was beginning to hang low in the sky, their shadows together preceding them as they walked the three blocks to the theatre.

After the movie was done, Michael and Fadwa walked over to an inviting East Indian restaurant and requested a booth. They ordered red wine and chose the extensive Indian buffet. As they sat down to their meal, Fadwa's demeanor changed. She became very emotional and explained to Michael what her father's will was for her. Michael was surprised and apprehensive. "In this country, I am a person, Michael!" Fadwa said, her eyes flashing. She continued, "If I return to our homeland, I am less than a person. I can be stoned to death for looking at another man, my husband can divorce me if I no longer satisfy him, my daughters can be subject to genital mutilation." She stopped and Michael dried her eyes with a napkin and held both of

her hands. "We're not going to let that happen," he said. She looked at him with tears in her eyes, "If I can stay here, become a citizen of this country, I can do much to open people's eyes to what is really going on. It's not Islam that is to blame, it is the people interpreting Islam that are in the wrong." "I think so too," Michael replied. Fadwa continued, "I want to open eyes, Michael, I want to change the way people think." The conversation went on for quite some time. It was intense and draining, and although Michael wanted to help as much as he could, he was not sure what he could do. It was well after 3:00 AM before Michael ensured that Fadwa got home to her dorm safely.

They spent more and more time together. Walking each other to their classes, eating lunch together, any evenings they could spend together. Fadwa's parents had a condominium in Montreal and spent time between their homeland and Canada, and they were very strict about her whereabouts. As they were a young couple in love, Michael was very concerned about this barrier and figured that the best way to proceed would be to meet Fadwa's parents directly. "No, no!" Fadwa would insist, "This would not be a good thing. You do not understand my father." "Then how can we be together?" asked Michael. "It is Allah's will, and his way will be revealed," Fadwa would explain. This answer would usually frustrate Michael. "What if I become a Muslim?" he offered. "It would not be the same," Fadwa would reply. Although Fadwa lived on campus, she still was obedient to her family's wishes and ventured out only a

couple of evenings during the week.

On one such evening, after strolling the streets of Old Montreal, Michael invited Fadwa to his apartment. Michael's apartment was small, but well kept, and it overlooked the McGill campus. It was a warm, breezy evening, and zephyrs of air were chasing through the room. They did not turn on any lights; the moonlight shone through the French doors of the balcony. Michael held Fadwa, "You are the most beautiful woman." Fadwa replied, "And you, Michael, I call you Najair<sup>5</sup>, or 'little star,' always burning brightly." As the breeze swirled at their feet, Michael ran his fingers over Fadwa's cheeks. They were soft and smooth. Michael and Fadwa shared a tender kiss. Michael caressed her hijab—it was made of the softest silk. Michael kissed Fadwa's forehead and gently put his fingers inside the hijab and slowly moved it back. Thick lustrous hair fell out, soft as silk and ran through his fingers like water. They shared a long passionate kiss. Her ears popped out and she giggled. Michael laughed. She smelled delicate like spring, and she smiled unabashedly as she took off her hijab. Her radiant hair fell halfway down her back. "Let me use your washroom to freshen up," Fadwa said and slipped away.

Michael lit some candles and sat on the couch facing the soft evening. Michael's eyes were concealed from behind! "I see you!" Fadwa whispered into his ear. Her cheek was soft. She smelled sweet and spicy, like fine incense. Michael looked at her, and she had transformed into a goddess. She was wearing a light blue tunic and sparse makeup that

made her beautiful face intoxicating to behold. Michael stood, and they embraced. They migrated to Michael's bedroom. Michael lay on the bed. Fadwa stood in front of him and unfurled her jilbab, letting it fall to the floor. The candlelight softly illuminated her body. Michael literally gasped at her beauty. She was a breathtakingly beautiful woman. Michael let his shirt fall to the floor, and the two held each other embraced in forbidden love. They lay on the bed and caressed each other and touched each other's bodies. Fadwa's hair glided across Michael's chest and he shuddered. She straddled him and kissed his him while her silken hair cascaded over them both. He touched her breasts and she inhaled sharply. They both wanted more, but slowed down, caressing, holding, whispering and touching. They embraced one another, kissed, and then lay beside one another. They talked about how they could be together while her father's will had been that she return to her homeland after her studies were complete. In Fadwa's home country, the punishment for what she had just done was death by stoning or other methods, or disfigurement and excommunication. The more they talked about Islam and its customs and Fadwa, it was clear that from what she had done, there was no return.

"You see, Michael, I love you," she said softly. So many emotions blew through his brain at that point: I'm not good enough for her, I'm not smart enough for her, she deserves better, I have no money, no job, I live in a small apartment, I'm not even Muslim . . . "Fadwa," he said softly, "I have

nothing for you, I have nothing for myself . . .” Fadwa put her finger on his lips. “You are Michael, you are a good man, and I have fallen in love with you. This has not happened by accident. It is Allah’s gift, and he will reveal the way.” They held each other for a long time. “I see you,” Fadwa whispered into Michael’s ear. “I see you,” Michael whispered back. They slept together while a quarter moon watched over them during the night. Before Michael fell asleep he whispered, “I love you, Fadwa,” and he drifted off into uncharted waters of bliss. In the morning, Fadwa was gone.

The next morning, Michael smelled the linens that she had slept in and inhaled the euphoric scent. He picked up his cell phone and dialed Fadwa’s number but got no reply. He showered quickly, dressed, and grabbed his books for school. He exited the apartment quickly and tried Fadwa’s number again, but he got no answer. He headed out on campus looking for her, knowing where her next class would be and where she would be waiting, but she was nowhere to be seen. He had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach that something was terribly wrong. He sent her a couple of text messages, but he got nothing in reply. Michael went to his classes, looking for Fadwa in between. It was about 4:30 PM, very warm and pleasant, and Michael stopped by his apartment to see if there was a note left there. There was no note outside the door, so he went in and checked his email on his laptop. There had been an email sent to him at about 2:30 PM. It read:

*Michael, my father has discovered us, I don't know what he'll do. I can't see you anymore.*

*Yours, Fadwa.*

Michael recoiled from the laptop as if it was a poisonous snake. “No, no, no,” he repeated. Tears blinded his eyes. He held his head in his hands. “I can’t live without her.” He smashed the computer screen with his fists until it was a spiderweb of destruction. All of the torment and horrible experiences of his life came bursting up. He couldn’t make it to the bathroom and vomited on the kitchen floor. He blew his nose with a bathroom towel and wiped the puke off his face. His mouth tasted of bile. “No. No. No,” he kept chanting, “Not this time. Not this time.” He was shaky and trembling all over. He went into his bedroom and pulled out a loaded .44 magnum from a night table drawer. He tucked it in his pants and concealed it with his shirt. He had to wipe some of the puke off the shirt. Michael got up, looked in the mirror, gave his face a quick wash with water, then exited his apartment. He slowly walked out onto the campus green and sat at the table he and Fadwa always studied at. He watched all the happy people go by—the couples, the professors, all those who had someone. That didn’t matter now. He carefully pulled out the .44 and slowly put it in his mouth. It was cold and tasted of oil and steel. He cocked the gun and slowly began to squeeze the trigger.

As he pulled the trigger, the noise of everything around him slowed down and became deafening. He closed his eyes, and against the roar, filled his mind with thoughts of Fadwa. She wanted to be the last thing he thought of. As he pulled the trigger, he felt something warm at his cheek and a shadow over his eyes as he remembered Fadwa, and whispered, "I see you." Then smirking, the .44 blew a hole clean through Michael's head. Michael's beautiful Fadwa had been behind him whispering in his ear when the .44 blew out Michael's brains, and it blew a hole through Fadwa's head as well. Fadwa, dead, collapsed on Michael. Their blood comingled on the table and pooled. Fadwa's cell phone fell out of her hand onto the table. She had sent Michael a text message:

*Dear Michael, I have talked to my father and explained to him a great many things. He is willing to find a way to work things out that we can be together. Love, your Fadwa.*

Slowly people gathered around the scene. They knew who the girl was, but no one knew who the boy was. Fadwa said Allah would show the way. Was that the path that Allah had set for the two unlikely lovers?

A verse in the fourth chapter of the Quran, An-Nisaa (The Women) instructs; "And do not kill yourselves, surely God is most Merciful to you." (4:29) May God have mercy on their

souls.



## Chapter 4

*When I love, I love you with my all.*

*I am yours, I bring the universe into alignment for you.*

*I show you the door, I hold out my hand.*

*You back away, and I hold heaven and earth apart for you.*

*I wait for you, while I crush under a load I cannot sustain.*

*And I find the way again to open the heavens wide.*

*But you don't hear me, you don't see me and I let go.*

*Stretched between two worlds, I can't let go,*

*I Die for you.*

## Fermentation

How long would a human soul have to be tormented so that no trace of humanity remained for the owner? How long would a human soul be starved of all nourishment such that it transfigures into a black tumor, like a plum into a cinder?

My soul is a tumor wrapped in razor wire. There were things that were done to me that were so egregious, so monstrous, that pen cannot commit them to paper. Brilliant psychological campaigns of terror are recorded beginning on the very fringe of the papyrus that is my memory. Campaigns continued unabated through my childhood and teenage years, and with each year, the damage was more fierce and the battles more bloody than the ones preceding it. This

fundamental staple of my upbringing and formation of my character was dressed every morning like a battle wound, with layer upon layer of field dressing pulled tightly and secured. No one knew but me. Like Spartan warriors selected and trained at a very young age develop into mighty warriors, I wonder if I was selected, and especially wonder what it was I should develop into. Moving through the graduation years of my rearing, the battles became more fierce, the devastation more extensive. It would take longer and longer to wrap the battle wounds to face the everyday.

Graduation “day” didn’t really come, it was more of a graduation period. Graduation officially occurred when I moved to a different city. When I looked at the details of my graduation, was I a soldier? An academic? A scientist? I found I was none of those things. The wound was still fresh in my chest and still required wrapping every day. My transcript indicated that I had learned to hate, and to lie, to steal, to conceal, and to elude. I had learned to blend, to become, to withdraw, to hurt and to disappoint. My transcript indicated that I had incredible potential and that I could twist these gifts into weapons of sabotage and snares. This was me. My soul was a miscreation. I resolved that none of what was in me should ever escape. I bound my soul with razor wire so nothing could escape from it. The wrapping reminded me of the biohazard sign.

(Age 23) “So, if you could be anything at all, what would you be?” the psychologist asked me. It was never too long before they got to the “who would you be question,” and I

always found it scripted and insincere. "Well," I would reply, "who would you like me to be?" It's always been my trademark. Target what it is that I need for survival, then like a chameleon, become what it is that is required by that role that will pay for or provide what it is that I want. I was good at it because that's what I was trained to do. Enter like a thief, plunder the store, and leave without paying. Some goals took longer to achieve (such as meeting and getting to know a person) due to the sustained high-energy acting required. Smaller things were more quickly obtained as an actor was adopted, money made, and the goods purchased.

Every day is a day accompanied by agony. Whether that agony is held in, or partially let out, it is ever present. Mostly the anguish is stuffed deep into the soul, the soul wrapped in razor wire. When alone, real tears of torment slip by the razor wire and can leave me emotionally overwhelmed by something as simple as a box of cereal or a house cat or a five-minute conversation with a child. My alone time is highly secure. I can sit down and cry on a couch for fifteen or twenty minutes at a delicate thought, and this to me a sign of weakness; this symbolic stigmata must not escape or be seen by adult or child.

*(Age 25)* With my soul bound tightly, I ensured I worked hard (I ran grounds keeping businesses in the summertime, performed hard physical work for contractors). I worked diligently on bachelor's and master's of science degrees. In selecting the educational path I would follow, I chose based upon what others thought that I should choose. Looking at

my Master of Science degree (with top marks), I wondered exactly what I could do with it. Nevertheless, I had gotten what I wanted: first a bachelor's degree, and secondly, a master's degree. Through those seven years, my heart remained wrapped with razor wire, and nobody knew but me. Going to university, with its throngs of people, gave me the opportunity to be a loner and melt into the walls while learning. Nobody knew me, nobody saw me, nobody loved me.

*(Age 13)* I had a bizarre friend in my elementary years—he blew himself and his family up while they were in their house while manufacturing high-grade explosives. Prior to that we would spend quite a bit of time formulating different compounds, but being eleven-year-old kids, explosives and rocket fuel were always the most fun to manufacture. I was always much more careful than he was. He suffered a blown-off finger and countless burns from our experimenting, finally paying the ultimate price. From that point forward, I never had any real friends. “Do you feel angry at school?” was another of the school psychologist’s standard questions. “No, not at all. I like all of the boys and girls in my school,” was my reply. “Good,” the shrink replied. “Very good.”

*(Age 46)* Everyone has goals. It depends on how old I am and if my shifting inner makeup would support pursuing and maintaining those goals. My desire for pretty women was strong, but in myself, this normal, healthy emotion of non-platonic attraction had been twisted and turned into

something that was considered evil. When this emotion tried to express itself, the weaponry would turn against itself, first losing aim, killing those around me, then curling completely and killing all in sight. To watch the drama is so confusing—at first a seemingly beautiful story unfolds, then very subtly like a scent stream, a nightmare begins to unfold, blooming black, ending with a preying mantis mating ritual where the male is sacrificed, decapitated, and consumed as the apex of the relationship.

*(Age 6)* I can remember playing on the asphalt playground at school, surrounded by an eight-foot chain-link fence, pulling up gigantic dandelion weeds with huge yellow flowers. Kids were skipping rope together in three or four areas of the playground, several other groups of kids were playing ball together in a couple of other spots. I thought that if I pulled out these weeds, I would get a special award from the school. Fact is, I didn't know what it was I was supposed to do, what I was to model. I was comfortably alone. I couldn't really tell training from the real world either, but I could begin to sense there was a difference. My mother and father were standing on the back steps of the school with a third person, and they were beckoning to me to come. This did not feel right. This felt wrong. I went to them, and I went inside the school to a room where we all sat down. My mother and father and the psychologist talked about me for a while about things I did not understand, then the psychologist leaned forward, peered over the table, looked at me and stated, "You like

girls, don't you, son?" I nodded my head vigorously. "That's good!" the shrink said, "that's very good!" I knew I had said the right thing, but I had no idea why I had been asked. It felt like my chest and face was on fire. I was embarrassed and stunned. On the flip side it was like having a programming chip plugged into the back of my brain; I knew what people expected. I was prewired that way to begin with.

How did I get to this place? How did I scale this near unconquerable precipice, alone, climbing for years through ice and fire, now standing on the edge of death?

*(Age 18)* Could there have been a happier period in my life? Though vicious battles still were being waged on the home front, a fortuitous change of schools allowed me to switch models and operating modes and bury the bitter past and start afresh. No one knew of my razor wire-wrapped soul, and there was a spirit of openness that enabled me to forge new relationships. I did extraordinarily well in school and was getting a sense of the massive talent that lay inside me. I had a beautiful girlfriend, model beautiful, sharing an idyllic relationship, complete with letters and picnics and love that burned white hot. It was a beauty to behold. It was the best year of my life, my high school year. I went off to university. She said she'd wait forever. I bought her a ring. After a few months of studies, the poison elixir of the relationship bottle tipped over, and the pungent odor trail slowly curled out like a serpent. The letters became shorter and without passion then finally stopped. And the

preying mantis feasted. And my razor wire-wrapped heart bled tears of inconsolable sorrow. The emotions that had run and the programs that executed in my brain had run unchecked and burned patterns of love and ethics in my brain that were forever forged in my brain. The heartache I felt got caught up in an endless loop, and the hurting never stopped. The acid that forged the hurting grows deeper day after day.

*(Age 5)* There must have been twenty children in the daycare, and all had drawn a picture with crayons. My picture was not like the other children's pictures, and it was drawn in crayon. I tried to scratch the crayon off the paper to start afresh, but instead just ruined it. I had crayon all under my fingernails. The teacher, Mrs. Ott, came walking behind me and bent over mine and said, "What is that a picture of?" in a pleasant voice. Too embarrassed, I just smiled at her and kept scratching. Not knowing the target made me uneasy.

And now I stand at the edge of death, and I run through my emotions. I close my eyes and take stock. I have no love, I have no will, I have no dreams, I am not a person, I am a miscreation.

*(Age 32)* Where I grew up, the family home was situated on two acres and had a river running behind it. It was beautiful with lovely trees—deciduous—and seventy-foot spruce trees and lush green grass. A high and beautiful hedge separated us from the neighbor on one side and the spruce on the other. At one point, my father added a

conservatory to the back of the house. In the conservatory, there were plants that my father liked so much and families of canaries that were always singing beautiful tunes. I was always proud of that home because I knew the uniqueness and value of the home. It was like growing up on an island of my own. When my father no longer wanted to work, my parents purchased a five thousand-square-foot mansion on four acres in the city of Vernon, BC. It was spectacular. It was high up on a hill in an exclusive area of town. It had a barn for horses and a chicken coop for raising chickens, a tack room, a huge garage, a walk-out basement, and fenced fields for raising cows. It even had a natural spring on the property and a personal orchard that grew the most delicious Spartan apples I have ever tasted. The views from the dining and family rooms out the windows are still burned into my memory. Those memories act like an accelerant, fanning the flames of sorrow that will never go away.

My father also purchased a condominium right on the Okanagan Lake. It was in the middle of a strip of about eight condominiums in the complex. That place in itself was beautiful, and we had a motorboat and kept it moored to the dock just steps away. He also was the first to build a second story onto the condominium, and within the space of five years, all eight units had added an upper story. It was a good memory. He also built a log cabin in the forest on the other side of the lake. These homes, they did something for me, made me feel secure and proud; I thought was a part of

what was a very successful family. When my father could no longer support the upkeep of these homes due to emphysema, they were sold, and my mother bought a single-wide mobile home for her to live in, and for my father to die in. The mobile home was one or two steps away from having to be torn down due to the age and deterioration of the home. Water would leak through the roof, and the furnace was an ancient machine that ran inside a closet. The carpeting underfoot was so worn that the printed pattern in it was barely visible. It covered discontinuities and warped floorboards throughout the entire unit. This whole series of events was devastating and took a piece of my life with it. It was more than a senseless loss of wealth—it was a loss of self-worth. Sorrow will forever continue to burn like a torch burning until the end of time.

*(Age 28)* I will be getting married to a person very different than myself. We share spirituality and passion for rituals of the Catholic church. Our engagement revolved very much around the Catholic church, but we were very different people. We had a unique love, one that was more confessed to than contracted to. We had a very traditional Catholic marriage. I knew by then that I had an abundance of talents after coming out of university. We purchased a small house with a fenced backyard, and a dog, and had our first child. Soon after we had our second child. I would do anything for those kids. The relationship continued year after year—there were disagreements of course, but these were usually resolved. At ten or twelve years into the marriage, the

relationship elixir bottle got tipped over and the contents began to escape, a black liquid seeping into the tablecloth, ruining the wood underneath, the familiar stain, odors curling out of the bottle like a skunk tail, carrying with it the pungent scent until black things bloomed like tumors throughout the house.

*(Age 8)* We lived on an acreage that bordered a river. All around us was prairie with the city just beginning to sprawl to that point. Walking home from school one warm September afternoon, caught in the grass was a large long balloon with no air in it. I picked it up and looked at it. It was about seven inches long, and the rubber was very thin and slippery. The opening where the balloon was inflated was the same diameter as the balloon. I carried it with me and when I got home showed it to my mother. She snatched the balloon from me and asked me if I had tried to blow it up. She must have asked me eight times if I tried to blow up the balloon, each time I said no. I thought it so strange, such an unusual reaction from my mother. The incident must have been churning in my mind, for the next day, I figured out what I had found, and it only made me love women more.

*(Age 12)* A wide and gentle river ran behind the property of our house. Walking home from school, I would often walk along the riverbank instead of the road. Around one meander of the river, there was a patch of silver willow that grew to about eight feet tall and had leaves that extended all the way to the ground. The leaves had a musky and slightly disagreeable odor when rubbed. I forged a secret

pathway through the covert and made myself a nest. I would visit my nest day after day and lay on my belly, hidden as other people walked along the riverbank—I remained invisible in my nest. Here I brought special things, pieces of intimate clothing and magazines with articles in them that made no sense to me. I was never ashamed of my nest because nobody ever discovered it. My awareness grew a lot during this time, and my walks home from school became intimate discussions with myself, counterpointed with the persons I presented to my family, my extended family of grandparents and uncles, and to my schoolmates.

*(Age 35)* I have sought self-admission to the mental hospital. I had been laid off from work some weeks ago, and that was not part of my plan; the result was a cumulating of mental tension that resulted in a complete and total meltdown. Being unable to make intelligent decisions, in discussion with my doctors, I admitted myself into an asylum. It was difficult being surrounded by retards and lunatics. We were allowed to leave the ward only in fifteen minute blocks, if you had earned them. There was no such thing as a private room here, so you were matched up with someone who was usually more fucked up than you were. I had managed to sneak a large knife into the asylum to guarantee my safety. My celly stole my stone rosary and some of my magazines. You only got to see your psychiatrist for a fifteen—to twenty-five-minute block sometime during the day (if you were lucky). I recognized all the questions, especially the first: "So, if you could be anything, what would

you be?" I asked that explanatory caveats to the question be answered such that the shrink gave up asking the question. This was one of the lowest points in my life and did not offer me any avenue for healing. I asked for ECT but was denied.

(Age 45) I have reached a state of catatonia that medicine and therapy can't crack. I believe there is a very strong biological component to this illness (likely the razor wire-tumor heart), and *physical* and *chemical* changes in the brain resulting in a prognosis of an advanced terminal disease. I am able to monitor the severity of the symptoms, and the time expected for survival is on the order of eighteen months, if willing to fight for them. There's no such thing as an old warrior.

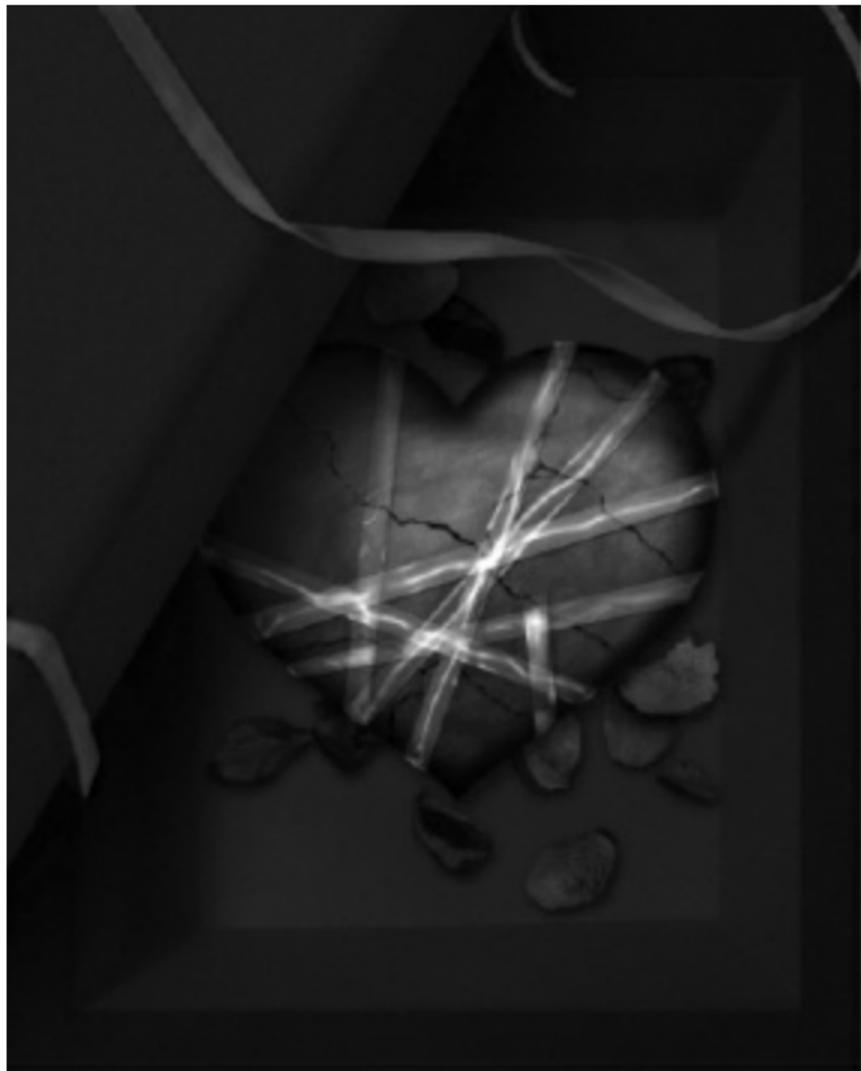
(Age 40) I discovered a theory of everything; a layman's theory that could be understood by the masses that explains in plain language the meaning, interaction and origin of everything. I never had a chance to write it down, and I don't think I could explain it; my brain contains hundreds of threads that define the theory. It's a pity.

(Age 47) The catatonic state and raw nerves are ever present. The house is filled with the pungency of tendrils of the black relationship elixir, like hundreds of sticks of bad incense choking the air in the house. I have checked and rechecked my benefits papers from work to ensure benefits are paid out in the case of suicide. I spent quality time with each child. I had my will drawn up, complete with a list of a

handful of names of who to contact. I went to the Catholic church we were married in and asked a priest to hear my confession. I wore my Brown Scapular, which is two-and-a-half-inch pieces of cloth on a cord which is worn around the neck. It carries with it a powerful promise: "Whosoever wears this garment shall not suffer eternal fire." It was late at night now. I drove to a remote location where roadwork was being performed but was now deserted. I parked under a tree and rolled the window down a crack. I wrapped my head with a long strip of material like a turban. A bullet going through the other side of the skull would be protected by the cloth, preventing the skull from blowing apart. I wanted to have an open-casket funeral, and the destruction of the head wound would be minimized with the cloth. Why I wanted an open-casket funeral is beyond me. Perhaps it gave people one chance to look at me and consider all the things I could have done. I considered for a moment that I really was about to do this and destroy this venerable life. But I was already dead anyway. I opened the glove compartment and withdrew a .38 special. I loaded it and put it on my lap. One thing left. I pulled out my cell phone and called 911, and I told the operator there had been a suicide at 35 Aspenstone Drive, SW, and then hung up. I rolled the window up, and turning on the truck that I loved so much, turned on the air conditioning and turned on CHQR AM talk radio. Coast to Coast AM with Art Bell was playing on the radio. They were talking about reincarnation and past lives. Perfect. I contemplate that like a good soldier, nothing I have written here is of substantial materiality that would

compromise the battle that was my life. Name. Rank. Serial Number. In truth and totality the reality is orders of magnitudes of horror greater, and shall forever remain secret. I put the .38 to my right temple, breathed deeply, and blew my brains out.

He had never, even for a day, been truly free. He left no mark upon the earth, the life fell, and nobody heard it fall.



## Chapter 5

*Find out where our universe has ripped,  
Ripped a black hole through the knee  
With needle and thread get it zipped  
I'll meet you under the banyan tree*

### Reciprocity

He struck a match and held it between his dirty hands, dirt under long nails. Orange light shone translucent through his fingernails. He cupped his hands around it, absorbing as much heat as he could before the match curled, and the red cardboard touched his fingers, burning them, and he had to let it go. He held the thin jacket tightly around him. The zipper didn't work. He'd gotten it from some goodwill agency. He was secreted between two buildings in a back alley, out of the worst of the winter winds, but it was still bitterly cold. He peeped out of his hideaway, dark shrunken eyes, shrunken cheeks, and shabby hair then popped back in. Early January in Calgary can be murderously cold.

He had some garbage bags that had some things he collected to put together a fire. Coffee cups, napkins, books, boxes, pieces of pallets, wood from construction sites—the day's assortment of what he had collected. He reached into his pocket, extracted the matches, and lit the pyre. It was dry, and in no time he had a warm fire crackling to keep him warm. Over the period of an hour he unballled, stretching his

legs out, his arms, leaning back, absorbing the heat. He had collected some pretty good food from behind some restaurants earlier in the day: wrapped deli-style sandwiches, some fruit, and canned exotic drinks. "Expired! Hmm hmm hmm ha ha ha!" he exclaimed, then let out a laugh. He put the items near the fire to defrost and ate an excellent meal.

After he had finished his meal, he put some large palette wood on the fire to keep it going. He unrolled a filthy bedroll and pillow and got ready to sleep. He got into the bedroll and got comfy, but sleep wouldn't come. He put plenty of heavy wood on the fire that would burn all night and laid mere inches from it—he was warm, and tired. But sleep wouldn't come. He fixed his eyes on the embers glowing red, and memories began to replay in his head.

His head slowly rolled back and rested on the building wall. He remembered breaking into the old woman's home and tying her up, going through her purse, finding forty bucks, booting her around, taking some jewelry, then going directly to get coffee and smokes. He smiled at that image and chuckled privately. He had been caught in that case, and the judge had called him a psychopath. He thought of the time he had gotten a hold of a twelve-year-old girl in her own room. He had climbed in her open window. He had her shirt off, but she wouldn't stop squealing and the cops were around, so he had put his hand over her mouth and nose so she couldn't breathe and couldn't make a noise. When the cops found them, the girl had suffered permanent brain

damage and had the IQ of a vegetable. He ended up before a judge in court with long oak pews like in church, being charged with attempted murder, child sexual interference, attempted rape of a minor, and a whole bunch more.

He was sentenced to a prison term of three to five with possibility of parole after two years. Prison was nasty. He was too old to hold his own, and he got beaten and sexually abused a lot on account of his crime being sexual in nature against a child. He grimaced when he recollected this memory. The judge had called him a psychopath and sexual deviant. He had a daughter, and the accusation didn't sit well with him. He shifted his body around to be more comfortable, and he closed his eyes. But the string of thoughts began to stream together. He remembered when he and Juliette were just married, holding her arm at the bicep and shouting his point across. He broke her arm in three places that night. He was so hammered that a neighbor drove his wife to the hospital to have the arm put into a cast.

He had opened his eyes and was frowning at the fire now. He remembered years ago now as a young man, before the major crimes, and working as an office worker. He had a desk job that had potential, and he had lots of friends. The group of friends went out for liquid lunches very often, until it began to affect his work badly. Their supervisor caught sight of the posse returning to work and interviewed them each individually. When the dust settled, he and a fellow employee were unceremoniously fired for habitual drinking

on the job while five were put on probation. He went back and lit the office building on fire. Two people died in the blaze. He was suspected, but never charged for the arson. Days later, he had driven to his boss's house wearing a balaclava and toting a hunting bow and hunting arrows, broke into his house at 3:55 AM, and shot his boss dead with an arrow shot through his neck. He raped his wife in front of his kids and killed her in the same fashion. He recovered the arrows, which made the crime unsolvable. He was not smart, but he had been lucky in not getting caught.

After the firing, he found himself tainted. He couldn't find a decent job, lost his car, eventually all investments, his home, his wife, and his kids. He had no option but the street. He thought about how he'd turned bad—because he had no choice, he told himself. The stream of dark consciousness continued, with the embers beginning to dim, and his mood became melancholy. He threw a few more chunks of wood on the fire. He lay back and grit his teeth back and forth, looking at the sky and tried to evaluate himself as a person.

As he lay there with his eyes closed, event after event would play itself out in his head. He extracted a pint of vodka from within an inside pocket—about half full. He drank the remainder. He squeezed his eyes shut as tightly as he could hoping the memories would go away, but they did not. Memories of the dozens of stabbings for petty amounts of cash, the opportunistic rapings by the dozens, the carjackings, the beatings for money, the arsons—it was a

cacophony of chaos and evil screaming inside of his head.

“No,” he screamed, “No no no no!” He sat up, eyes filled with tears as he recalled what happened the afternoon in crystal clarity. He had been sitting inside the mall to get warm, dressed in two or three coats, holding a hand-rolled cigarette with long dirty fingernails, when he looked up at a young girl with a baby in her arms. Their eyes met for a moment and locked in a powerful gaze. Their eyes did not move, but they sized one another up. She was exceptionally pretty, and she held her baby boy tighter. She broke the gaze and moved on quickly without saying a word. He held up an arm in her direction in a feeble attempt to capture her. Ask her for forgiveness? Say he loved her? She was his daughter, the baby was his grandson. Now in the back alley, he could not be consoled. This was a life that he chose to have. But bad choices had locked him into this life of evil and debauchery.

He ran a rough hand underneath his nose wiping the snot away, then reached into his pocket and brought forth his tobacco-rolling materials. He rolled himself a cigarette and smoked it by the fire, thinking and planning. He threw it into the fire and reached into his coat pocket and brought forth a plastic bag. He reached into a knapsack and brought out some lighter fluid and sprayed it inside the bag. He would get high and die at the same time. He put the bag over his head down to his neck and began to twist the opening shut behind his neck with a piece of wood about fourteen inches long. He twisted it until no air could enter

the bag, and began suffocating. He began to flail after about a minute, and within about three minutes, he was dead.

The body hadn't even had time to cool. The silhouette of an angel drifted across the smoky aura of the moon, wings fully spread. It made several large circles and glided between the two buildings. The angel was large and all black, and as it landed it beat large black feathered wings that blew debris and dust from beneath its landing point. On such a chilly night, moisture evaporated from the angel, giving it an eerie aura in the white moonlight. He stood in the alley, settling his feathers, sniffing the air, and walked toward the smell of smoke. He walked near silently. His features were Nordic, but his skin was so black it was hard to make out details of his face. He had long, black, flowing hair. He stopped at the entrance between the two buildings and walked to where the man committed suicide a few moments earlier. The man was there, slumped down in front of a fire that was now just glowing embers. The angel pulled the bag off the man's head. Blood had pooled in his mouth, and a thin stream poured out of the corner of his mouth onto the frozen ground and was absorbed. The man's soul was four or five black and grey, dimly glowing nebulous orbs hovering and orbiting about his head. The angel withdrew a black pouch from inside his cloak and opened it. The man's soul was drawn into the bag, and the angel cinched it shut. The man was now but an empty carcass. The angel opened his right wing, and the grandchild peered out. The angel opened his left wing and his daughter peered out. At that

moment, the man's daughter awoke from her slumber in her bed in her home with the image of what the angel had revealed; and his grandchild started crying unable to interpret the vision that he saw. The angel turned and walked out from between the two buildings and into the alley, and with a powerful beating of his wings, took to the air flying higher and higher. Once again his silhouette passed in front of the aura of the gibbous moon on the cold and frigid night, higher until he could no longer be seen. A single black feather floated down from the heavens and landed near the man. A coyote with glowing eyes looked between the two buildings from the alleyway and skulked toward the scene.



Professor Black struggled to get back into his wheelchair. He had just used the washroom and hadn't wiped himself completely, leaving shit on his legs and his pants pulled halfway up, and he had now fallen partially down between the toilet and the cubicle wall. He called for help. He wondered when it was that he had lost the last vestiges of his dignity. Probably within the last few months. He was afflicted with ALS, the same disease that Stephen Hawking has. A disease that gradually takes away muscular control until the victim is essentially paralyzed.

The professor almost always had an escort lately due to his deteriorated condition. When meeting new people, most

would look at him then to the escort, seeking an explanation as if the professor was retarded. The escort would describe that Professor Black suffered from a debilitating disease “A disease that gradually takes away muscular control until full paralysis occurs.” Said quickly, this seemed to calm and satisfy the curious. But it was much more than that. At what point was the dignity compromised? At what point were Professor Black’s dreams and aspirations compromised? At what point was the *humanity* sacrificed? At what point did the professor accept that these things were compromised? How gory had been the battle that had already taken place between disease, life, and this scarred, battle-weary warrior before you?

“Oh, you’re like that scientist guy in the wheelchair . . . Stephen Hawking.” Yes, he was like Stephen Hawking. Somehow his similarity in having ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, abbreviated ALS, also referred to as Lou Gehrig’s disease) made people feel better, less scared and more likely to count themselves lucky for not having such a devastating condition. The professor had some movement left in his arms and could move his feet a bit. He had the last vestiges of speech left, and the research team he led were able to interpret what he was saying. He also had a linguistic computer that he was able to use somewhat independently.

“Help,” called Professor Black. His two assistants knocked at the cubicle door, “Professor?” and they came in. They wasted no time in cleaning him up and getting him

back into his wheelchair, out of the washroom, and out into the lobby.

They were in McCormick Place in Chicago. McCormick Place was one of the largest venues in the United States. Professor Black and his team were to present research results in a cancer symposium that had brought the very best to Chicago to present. There was tremendous excitement around what Professor Black was going to present—tantalizing pieces of their research had appeared in the *Journal of Cancer Research*, *Journal of Cancer Research and Therapeutics*, the *Journal of Medicine*, and many, many more. The symposium had drawn in about 4500 people.

Professor Black was a medical researcher, and a very good one. He was a Professor Emeritus at Stanford University. His research team had discovered thirteen related genes, that when interacted in a certain way and sequence, “turned on”, causing the production of a protein that sped up the growth and metastasization of cancer cells. The team, through twelve years of research, had mapped the relationship between the genes and discovered how they interacted biochemically. The team had laid the groundwork for the eradication of cancer in the next five to ten years. His work with rats and monkeys had validated his discoveries beyond a shadow of a doubt. To say it was a breakthrough would be an understatement. This was akin to the discovery of the transistor in electronics or the double helix in biology. He had found a cure for cancer. Tonight he was giving a speech at McCormick Place. As the ALS had robbed the

majority of his ability to speak, he was presenting the discovery with senior members of his research team. Today was day three of a five-day symposium focused on advancements in cancer research.

Professor Black's presentation was next. It would run about three hours and was scheduled to start at 1:30 PM. There had been a different master of ceremonies each day, and today, the master of ceremonies was the 2009 winner of the Nobel Prize for Medicine, Jack W. Szostak. Professor Black, his escorts, and four research team members, waited in the wings for the professor to be introduced.

The hall went silent as the lights dimmed, and a single spotlight shone on professor Black's wheelchair as it powered its way across the stage to the center. Dr. Szostak gave a brief history of Professor Black as a means of introducing him, and the hall erupted into enthusiastic applause. Dr. Szostak then introduced the members of the professor's research team, and they walked in and stood by the professor to polite applause. Two podiums on either side of the professor were set up for his research team. Two microphones were brought over and set up in front of Professor Black: one in front of his speech synthesizer, and one in front of his mouth as he could still communicate to a certain degree. "Hello and thank you for coming," the monotone synthesized voice spoke. "We're all very happy you could be with us as we have some fantastic research results to share." The presentation began with a discussion on the genetic switches in cancer. There were two projection

screens behind the team that were flashing up graphs and photographs to support what the team was presenting. As the presentation went on, it became apparent that Professor Black had indeed made a quantum leap in the understanding and treatment of cancer. It was nothing short of brilliant.

As the presentation wound down, Professor Black spoke directly into his microphone, "We have, ladies and gentlemen, discovered cancer's Achilles' heel, and found a way to turn it against itself. We have discovered a cure for cancer." The professor's work was nothing short of brilliant—he had discovered facts and made deductions that would otherwise have taken a hundred or two hundred years into the future to discover. The symposium was astounded. McCormick Place erupted in deafening applause. Professor Black bowed his head in appreciation of the applause. The emotion in the theater was electric. The research team stayed for an additional hour answering questions from the symposium after Professor Black had to leave the stage due to sheer exhaustion.

The professor was exhausted. He wanted to be alone. A drop of blood fell onto the front of his tuxedo. He related to his two attendants that he would like to eat and have his personal hygiene taken care of, then left to sleep alone prior to tomorrow's flight back home. They were uneasy with the idea of leaving him alone, but he did have a callout device should anything happen. Professor Black dined on his usual tube-fed gruel, was cleaned and fresh incontinent

garments applied. His muscles did not function anymore, but his nose did, and the odor was putrid. His escorts placed him into bed, dimmed the lights, and closed the door.

Professor Black heard them enter the room next to his and heard them erupt into shouts of pure joy with other colleagues and friends. He lay in bed, unable to move, thinking about the evening. At what point he shit himself during the presentation, he didn't even know. A tear formed in his right eye and ran down his cheek. His left did the same until tears were running down both cheeks. He had given so much to the world. Was it because of the predatory nature of the disease that caused him to be so aggressive in his research? Did it cost him a family? He was so busy that he never had time to go out on dates and meet the right person while he was whole. My God, he thought to himself, I'm still a virgin. My whole life, he thought, my whole life. Now at fifty-two, he lay motionless in a hotel bed after the penultimate moment of his life. He lay motionless in bed, in a diaper, with tears streaming down his face. Was he crying because the disease had all but run its course? And he most certainly did not have the time it took to discover the steps that led to the next leap in biochemical science. He stopped crying and waited for the tears to dry. He was a scientist, damn it.

He activated the emergency device, and within eight seconds, his escorts were at his side, worried. He used his synthesized voice, "I want a drink." "Are you sure that's a good idea, sir?" said the escorts, worried. Professor Black

insisted, "It's my party and I want a goddamn drink." The escorts looked at one another. "What would you like to drink, sir?" they asked. "I want scotch," Black replied. "Very well, sir," the escort replied, going to the minibar. "No, not that scotch, the best scotch!" Black insisted. "Very well," the escort said, calling room service and asking for a bottle of the best scotch in the house. "The best scotch they have is Glendronach twenty-five-year-old," the escort replied. "Perfect," Black said. Within a few minutes the scotch and a crystal glass arrived at the door, and the escorts signed for it and brought it over. "How do you want to do this, sir?" the escort asked. "I want to drink it," Black replied. The escorts sat him up in bed and poured him a glass, and they held it to his lips and poured a small amount in. The professor immediately began to choke on the spirits and had to be aspirated in order to establish a free airway. It took half an hour before he was breathing normally again. Professor Black was resigned once again, laid on his back and left alone.

He was a man utterly crushed. Despite all his accomplishments, he was a man who felt he had no future. He lay awake for a long time before finally falling asleep. He began dreaming. He dreamed he was a young man again, running through a field of green grass, chasing a beautiful girl with a black veil. When he caught up with her, he held her in his arms. She said, "You can run more quickly than I. So what is it that causes you to run so quickly?" "To look upon your lovely face," he replied. But she pushed him away,

"You know that's not allowed, not yet." "At least tell me your name?" Black implored. The lady in the veil smiled and answered "Betty". The professor smelled all the beautiful smells and moved through the small town of people, never having felt so happy. He was walking on the boardwalk with the beautiful girl en route to the bakery. They turned the corner and at the end of the sidewalk, there was an old man in a wheelchair. He couldn't move because of ALS, and he was in direct sunlight and getting a bad sunburn. Black looked at him, excused himself from the woman for a moment, and moved the old man out of the sun. The old man's lips could hardly move in what could be interpreted as a "thank you." The professor rejoined his company. She took his hand, "That was kind. Our town is full of kind people, and we only welcome those souls who are kind to come and live in our community. You are a stranger to our city. What did you come to see; and what is it you want?" "I want to stay here with you in this beautiful town." She smiled under her veil. "Come," she said.

They went to a small deserted playground. She directed him to sit on a bench designed to view children at play. She went behind him and put her hands delicately over his eyes. She smelled of lavender. "Tell me, Professor Black, what is it you want?" She removed her hands from his eyes and he could see horizons, hundreds of them, with different colors and intensities meeting the ground. It was like a giant rainbow with infinite colors that stretched across the horizon that he viewed. Each horizon he looked at he could

see different times in history; times in history that had passed, and times that had not yet come to pass. Each horizon was fluid and changing, like looking at the Northern Lights. The horizons cast a light show upon the ground that they were sitting on. Black looked at the woman with the veil and saw the beauty of the lights reflect off all parts of her but the veil. "That is your time and space," the woman with the veil said, pointing to a horizon. When he looked at it, he saw himself sleeping in his hotel bed with his wheelchair and speech synthesizer beside him, then the scene morphed to lives being lost due to an occupational civil war in a war-torn part of South Africa. Betty continued, "In our horizon, we live for thousands of years, and we have a population of about fifty thousand. One of our responsibilities is to help travelers find the right horizon for them—one horizon of many, how many even I do not know. We all coexist in parallel space and time, too close together to be measured."

Professor Black looked at the other horizons, some spectacular worlds, some desolate, some unpopulated. He felt peace flow upon him like a refreshing waterfall. He was so relaxed. "John," the girl said, "I am Betty Winslow." I am chargé d'affaires in this universe, in this world. She spoke quietly through her veil, "Your mind has not only found a cure for cancer that ails your world, but you have come to understand the nature of space and time." Professor Black nodded. "This is what enables us to have this conversation, it is what enables you to have a choice," Betty said. Betty

continued, "In your world, your body is broken, and you no longer have the strength and time it would take to bring this understanding to the people in your time. People in your time will make these discoveries, but not for hundreds of years. They will use basic science you performed to make these discoveries." Professor Black saw himself in the hotel bed again in one of the horizons. "You may choose your fate, John," Betty said softly. Professor Black watched the horizons—observing wars, tropical paradises, events that had transpired hundreds of years ago, and events that were yet to be. In a profound way, he was witness to all of space and all of time. Betty grasped his hand and he looked at her, "I want to stay in this world," he said, "in this dimension, to probe what lies beyond the horizons." Betty smiled beneath her veil, "Then come with me, John, and forfeit your life in your time."

They walked to an altar of stone. Professor Black first climbed the stairs to a stone altar and lay on his back. Betty softly handed Professor Black a silver knife wrapped in white lace. "To forfeit is something that must be done by you and only you," Betty said. He nodded understanding and took the knife. The horizons danced across the sky, and as he thought more and more about the horizon he was on, with Betty, it expanded and filled the sky in a brilliant display of color and life, and Professor John Black slit his throat. There was a blinding flash of light as the knife cut through his throat. A single drop of blood fell to the ground and was absorbed. There was the sound of beating wings,

and the black angel arrived at the altar where Professor Black had just taken his life. Betty bowed her head in the presence of the angel. He took several steps toward Professor Black. His soul was in five nebulous, grayish white, iridescent orbs orbiting about his head. The angel reached inside his cloak and withdrew a black pouch. He opened it and drew in Professor Black's soul, cinched the pouch shut, and returned it inside his cloak. The angel took several steps away from the body, and with a strong beating of his black wings, lifted off and away.

It was about two o'clock in the morning, and the escorts were checking the professor. They were in a panic; he appeared unresponsive. Emergency medical was called in, and the official announcement was made that Professor Black had died in his sleep. The escorts didn't know how to describe one piece of evidence—an ethereal piece of white lace that was clutched in the professors hand. He had a smile on his face.



Nobody knew what it was like to be her. She was probably of Asian descent, mixed with Jamaican, African American, or Polynesian blood. She always had her hair tied, presumably because she was unable to wash it easily. She had some kind of a progressive genetic disease, to be sure. Her face was covered in brownish white scales, like the bark

of an evergreen tree, and most anywhere there was skin. It looked like another disease had twisted her bones into agonizing contortions. Her feet faced almost opposite directions, her knees were swollen to the size of basketballs, and her back was twisted in both planes, horizontally and vertically. The fingers of her hands were bent at impossible angles and had limited mobility. Even with the deformed face, you could see the pain written over her as she willed her twisted body to move, then to walk. She most often had a shopping cart that she would lean on and use to collect cans and other collectables to supplement her disability income.

I watched her in McDonalds one afternoon ordering a cheeseburger and a cup of coffee. A drop of blood fell on the front of her shirt. It was difficult for her to speak—there was some paralysis involved in her vocal cords—and she leaned her weight on the counter and repeated over and over to the Chinese cashier what she wanted. It must have taken her five minutes to order the coffee; the cheeseburger was a bit quicker as there was a picture of one nearby that she could point to. She was exhausted. A kind Samaritan helped her and carried her tray to an empty table where she thanked her with her eyes. Over the next forty-five minutes, she ate the cheeseburger and drank the coffee. It was an agonizing affair. As she was in a downtown McDonald's, the class of people was less than elite, and she drew stares from drug dealers, bums, down-and-outs, thieves and classless people. They held themselves over her in terms of social

status; the contemptible collection of reprehensible humanity. But she was used to it. When she had finished her meal, she gathered up the waste and slowly twisted her way to an upright position and slowly moved out from behind the table and toward the garbage can. It was excruciating to watch. It must have taken her five minutes to dispose of her waste, and another five minutes to exit from the store. The entire time she was the extravaganza that everybody watched, mostly in silence. I, too, was guilty of watching her, but I watched her more to admire her strength and the interplay of her grotesque appearance with the abominable mindsets of the clientele in the restaurant. She still had her pride. She still had her *humanity*. In a way, it was a beautiful thing to watch. One of nature's rare bestowments, and how she turned without effort into something that was not to be ashamed of. How rare. How unique. How extraordinary.

I had finished my Quarter Pounder and fries quite some time ago, but I sat pondering the scene I had just witnessed. The McDonalds had turned back into a bustling armpit of humanity—foreign workers who spoke little English slinging greasy food to the lowest of the low in society. I stood up quickly, noted how quickly I stood up, and made a hasty exit. I wondered why I didn't get up and help her out of the restaurant, for shame.

I melded back into my world of comfort and privilege. I was actually on duty in the ER around 9:00 PM that night when they came in. A large, good-looking man with a beard

in his early forties was carrying the woman I watched in McDonalds in his arms saying that she was having trouble breathing. We triaged her right away and discovered that she was in respiratory distress. The man's name was Eric, Eric Burgess. He put his hands on my shoulders and looked into my eyes, and told me that her name was Serena. He asked if he could be present during the examinations, but I told him it would be best if he waited in the waiting area. We put Serena onto a gurney and began to assess her. The scales on her face were stiff and almost woodlike. They extended inside of her mouth and inside of her throat, somewhat leading us to believe it could be the source of the respiratory difficulty. I had absolutely no idea how to treat them if they were the cause of the difficulty. They seemed to be consuming her from the outside in. I started her on oxygen immediately and was able to ease the respiratory distress to a small degree. We proceeded to do a full body exam. Her body was twisted and contorted into the most unnatural shapes—it was like Proteus syndrome but much more severe. Serena was in a crippling amount of pain, making examination difficult. I discussed the preliminary examination results with Eric and suggested that we give Serena morphine for the pain and a full body CRT scan to get a picture of what was going on. He agreed and again held my shoulders and told me to “take care of his Serena.”

Serena was given pain and relaxation medication and given a full-body CRT scan. The results of the scan were devastating. Her ribs were growing a bonelike structure on

the inside, putting pressure directly on the lungs and heart, with the result that Serena was slowly suffocating. According to the history we had taken, Serena had been experiencing worsening difficulty in breathing for six weeks now. She was only able to move less than 10 percent lung volume. We researched the medical literature for any cases like Serena's and came up with nothing. Surgery was out of the question due to the extent of the growth inside of her body.

I steeled myself for the conversation with Eric. "She doesn't have much time Eric." Eric's eyes filled with tears, "But she is my everything, Doctor, I can't live without her, there's got to be something you can do." "I am sorry. We can make her comfortable, but the best thing you can do is be with her while you can. Hold her hand, let her know you are there." Eric nodded as the tears rolled down his cheeks. I sat down with him and asked him if Serena was his wife. "No," Eric replied, "she's not my wife, but she is my world." I looked at him with a query on my face. Eric continued, "I was down on my luck, and I was in McDonald's and I didn't have enough money for a coffee. Serena bought me a coffee. We sat down, we talked, we laughed, we enjoyed each other's company. We'd meet every couple of days for a coffee at McDonalds," Eric said, wiping his nose. "I got some of my confidence back and got a job stocking shelves at Safeway," Eric continued, "Nobody would have me, Doctor, everyone makes fun of me, my appearance, the way I talk, everything." He blew his nose in a handkerchief. "But Serena, she is different. She is the only person I've ever met who has

accepted me for who I am, for what I am. You don't understand, Doctor, she's an angel." I smiled as I contemplated the profundity of what he had just explained to me. "Go with her now, Eric, be with her while you can," I said. Serena was put into a single room that afforded Eric privacy in his last moments spent with Serena. Eric spent every moment with her. Serena lasted through the night and through the next day into the afternoon.

Around 2:35 PM the next day, the nurse checking on Serena discovered that she had passed away. Eric lay beside her in the bed with his arm around her. He had overdosed on a large quantity of morphine. A black angel with a black pouch had appeared next to Eric, and a white angel with a white pouch had appeared beside Serena moments earlier. The blankets on the bed were soaked from tears, tears that Serena could not cry. On the table next to the bed were two half-full cups of McDonald's coffee.



## Chapter 6

*When life fails to thrive,  
When every movement holds no joy  
When your very soul is frozen inside  
Nothing's left to enjoy*

### The Others

It was early in the evening, the sun had set about an hour ago, and the avenue's color was draining to black and grey. Shops lined both sides of the street and bordered one another—solid walls of shops. Layer upon layer of graffiti, ash and blood, covered the walls of brick, cinder block and metal-clad buildings. At night, it was hard to distinguish one shop from the next because of the contiguous graffiti that used the wall of shops as a palette. This had once been an upper-scale pedestrian mall in the heart of the city, and had been rich in unique architectural detail that included gardens blooming year round, bronze sculptures, artistic steel monoliths, outdoor auditoriums, and a skating rink. People used to bustle and whisk through the area patronizing fine eateries, high-end fashion shops, and exclusive merchants. That was before the accident. The city's one-time prime jewel now was home to seedy pawnshops, dollar stores, greasy eateries, whore houses, and opium dens. After dark, the desolate and despicable would roam the streets unchecked.

The three of them strutted down the sidewalk. Steven, called Sasquatch, was a huge goon of a boy at well over six and a half feet tall, with a sloppy build, large looming gut, and eyes half closed behind thick glasses. He had short cut hair and a large head. He carried with him a homemade mace—a large steel ball on the end of a length of chain. Grant was tall and lanky. He was thoughtful and articulate. He liked to dress well, in fine, stylish sweaters and tailored pants. He was going prematurely bald, so he shaved his head. He wore tailored shirts, and carried a nasty switchblade. Alex was short, dark and compact, and carried a razor-sharp machete. Alex was calculating and deliberate and would wait for the right time to strike. The three were known for their horrific deeds, and the scanty police presence would only ever cause them to scatter, if police even happened across the trio performing their villainous deeds. The trio was just getting started this evening. Grant tended to choreograph the group's activities and was the makeshift leader. More often than not, their antics were indiscriminate; mayhem for mayhem's sake. They would, however, steal money and plunder residences, to support their lifestyle and buy the drugs they used and the clothes they wore. They were loathsome marauders, vile and obscene, egregious in their exploits. They fed off terror, the more terror and mayhem they could generate and propagate, the more psychotic enjoyment they had. The infliction of terror bound them together. As they walked down the sidewalk, Grant stopped and urinated on a mailbox. Sasquatch chuckled, and due to his height, urinated *into* the

mailbox. Alex looked the other way. He seemed offended by the carnal acts.

Prior to “the incident,” the global economy had slipped into a deep depression—this after the world economy had rebounded from the recession of 2029 some twenty years earlier. Prior to the incident, there had been unprecedented progress and discovery in all areas of human endeavor. Super conductivity construction on a large scale had revolutionized transportation, powering commuter trains at speeds of up to four hundred miles per hour. Biologists had sequenced the most critical diseases—congenital, viral, and biological, and built treatments for the majority. Nano technology drove advancements in the treatment of disease and a myriad of applications in many fields of technology. Stephen Hawking’s theories of cosmology and quantum gravity had been proven, and minute black holes had been created and studied in the laboratory. Moore’s law<sup>7</sup> continued to hold true through the clever combination of bacterium and integrated circuits—circuits grew and adapted to computing tasks. DNA computing was refined—computing which used DNA, biochemistry, and molecular biology, instead of the traditional silicon-based computer technologies.

The exponential achievements of humanity had been made possible by the combined connectivity and collaboration of humanity. Unprecedented connectivity harnessed the combined intelligence and creativity of the human species. Advancements were not limited to peaceful

purposes, and weapons of mass destruction were covertly made to be more deadly using new technologies. In addition to nuclear weapons, biological weapons were constructed that used weaponized virus, bacteria and engineered genomes. A plethora of weapons were made that were equipped to disrupt DNA, primarily by Iraq, Iran, North Korea and surrounding countries. Such weapons were capable of making populations of peoples biologically unviable. Most countries, including small radical nations, were armed with the new modern weapons as they became cheaper to manufacture.

“The Incident” began on January 13, 2033 as debris falling from the International Space Station was detected and interpreted by automated systems of several small countries as missile attacks, and missiles were fired in retaliation. The molecular computing systems were not self-aware but calculated the need to fire weapons as a means of survival. The incident grew in size as automated systems took over launching weapons until the entire globe had launched most of the weapons of mass destruction. It was what humanity had feared the most in the past one hundred years. It was estimated that between a quarter and a third of the population of planet earth was destroyed in the exchange, along with half the arable land and countless animal and plant species. Hope and humanity were noble tragedies of the mishap of '33; and where people had merely written about the dark side of humanity, it could be found on full display, ten times worse than what authors

and philosophers had historically mused about.

Mutants were an unwelcome but inevitable side effect of the release of the biological and genetic weapons deployed during the Incident. In areas that were hit by the biological weapons, nine out of ten live births were born deformed, and of those only two of ten would survive, the remaining eight being mutated to the extent that they were unviable and stillborn. The mutants were mostly despised. They were considered soulless, and the miscarriage of life that was a mutant was considered to best be aborted or killed on birth. It was primarily fear and contamination of the gene pool that sustained the distaste for the mutants; recombinant DNA after the incident resulted in heinous abominations. Some felt the humane thing to do was to try to salvage the human portions of the afflicted, making them look as “normal” as possible through surgery. Being a mutant wasn’t their fault, some people thinking that it was punishment due for ancestral failure to adequately safeguard humanity. Some thought the mutants were sent as a punishment from God. Some killed any viable mutants at birth. Mutants tried to blend in as much as possible if the deformation was not immediately visible or could be covered with clothing; to be born free of genetic defects was to be truly blessed. To openly display one’s mutated body was to invite one’s self to be murdered.

As the three walked down the avenue, they came across a convenience store being locked up for the night by a lady on the inside of the building. The woman looked up and

saw the trio outside the glass door and desperately hurried to lock the door. "Anyone hungry?" asked Grant. Sasquatch nodded his head vigorously, drool hanging from the side of his thick lips, while Alex kept his hands in his pants pockets. "What's the matter, Alex?" Grant said, "too much pocket pool, I'd say." With that Sasquatch wound up and kicked Alex in the groin, instantly dropping him to the sidewalk in agony. Steven was born with a parasitic twin and had its arms and legs removed surgically soon after he was born. Steven also had a mutation which gave him extraordinary strength, much like an orangutan.

"C'mon, Steven, let's go shopping!" Grant sang. Sasquatch booted the door open, hurling the woman who was locking up to the floor. She got up and ran behind the sales counter as Sasquatch blocked the doorway. The woman, who looked Lebanese, shook with terror behind the counter. She grabbed a shotgun behind the counter and was trying to load it, but she was shaking too much and shells were falling to the floor. Grant went to the back of the store. "Look here, Steve-o, they don't have my brand of crisps!" and with that, Grant booted the shelving unit of chips and snacks over. The woman dropped the box of shells, and Sasquatch moved quickly behind the counter with the cashier, placing an unbreakable choke hold on her neck with his mace. The woman stayed perfectly still and pleaded for her life. Alex had recovered from the kick to the groin and came in, and with the handle of his machete broke out all the glass of the refrigeration units. "Well, good to see you, Sir Alex," Grant

said, "thought you'd lost the stomach for a bit of fun." Alex made no comment and was dark and brooding. They filled up a sack with several bottles of liquor and cartons of cigarettes, hashish, and snacks.

Grant sauntered up to the woman, and carrying a bottle of whiskey, smashed the bottle of liquor against her head. She went down, and Grant and Sasquatch started kicking her. Sasquatch stood with his back in front of the window watching and laughing. "We don't fuck that kind, do we, Grant?" he said. She could barely breathe and was spewing up blood with each kick. Grant said it would improve her body tone. One final kick to her jaw sent teeth flying. Alex walked over to the terrified woman, and while shaking his head "no" all the time, dragged her up by her left hand. He flattened out her hand on the counter and cut her fingers off with his machete and put them into his pants pocket. Grant poured a bottle of overproof rum on the woman and lit her on fire. Sasquatch laughed even harder. Laughing hysterically, the trio left the store.

They walked quickly, a sole streetlight casting long shadows, and turned the corner quickly. There was really no law enforcement to think of in this quadrant of the city, and they slowed their pace. Grant halted suddenly and turned to face Alex, "Why do you have to do that shit?" "What shit?" Alex asked. "It's not good enough to cut 'em and fuck 'em, you have to take *pieces* of 'em, for fuck sakes. Alex, what's wrong with you?" Grant demanded to know. "It's what we do," Alex replied. He may have been referring to his

Columbian heritage—it was unclear. “You’re fucked in the head, Alex,” Grant said. Sasquatch began to chuckle. “Maybe it’s you who’s fucked in the head.” Alex replied, holding his machete in striking position. Among the three, Alex was the most skilled with his weapon. “What have we here?” Grant queried. “You question me, my people?” Alex asked, light glinting off the machete. Grant did not want to fuck with Alex with a machete. He would lose that matchup. “How about I take your fingers and your cock?” Alex asked moving forward, the machete flashing through the air lightning fast and coming to rest under Grant’s nose. “*Or haven’t you got the heart for it?*” Alex’s eyes fixed on Grant’s, and he spoke through a growl. Grant swallowed. Sasquatch’s chuckle ended abruptly; the air was full of tension. “Now, let’s calm down here, old boy. I just don’t have the tummy for putting fingies in my pockets is what I’m saying,” Grant said looking into Alex’s eyes. “Put the machete down, it’s just plain rude.” Grant put his fingers on the blade and pushed it down from his face. Grant smirked, and Sasquatch grabbed Alex from behind in a bearhug that squeezed all the air out of Alex. “Now, Alex, that wasn’t very nice.” Grant mercilessly kicked Alex in the groin, in the stomach, and beat his face until it was good and meaty. “Now, Alex,” Grant began, “you may be fucked in the head, but should you ever hold your machete against my head, I shall serve you your nuts in your own finger bowl.” Sasquatch hit him in the head with his mace that sent Alex to the ground unconscious, and Grant and Steven went on their way laughing and chuckling.

Grant and Steven walked down the dimly lit sidewalk. The sidewalk was in poor repair and litter was strewn about the road; the vehicles parked on the street mostly had their wheels stolen, headlights smashed out, and their windshields broken and vandalized. Mutant animals skulked in the back alleys. A coyote with a single glowing eye looked out from the alley as it ate the carcass of a chicken. It was a treacherous and careless place to walk, after dark especially. During the day, the area had shops that repaired vacuums, sold guitars, massage parlors, pawnshops, greasy diners, and the like. At night they all had roller type armor that protected the premises from thieves and opportunists. Only opium dens, drug emporiums and whore houses remained open past dark. The opium dens were perceptible by dim light escaping around the door frame and the unmistakable odor of opium and hash seeping from the metal doors to the entrance.

A well-dressed middle aged couple was walking toward Grant and Steven. Their car had broken down fifteen or twenty blocks back, and they were looking for a telephone to call a tow truck or a taxi. "Look, Grant, look what's walking our way," Steven said. "Indeed, Stevey, indeed," Grant replied. As the couple approached, Grant politely stopped and asked the man, "Excuse me, good and kind sir, but would you happen to have the day's time?" The woman tensed up and looked at Steven nervously, then at Grant with blood spatter all over his sweater and pants, as the man looked at his watch. "Yes, it's . . ." Grant crushed the

man's chin with a punishing uppercut, followed by a knee to the groin. The man crumpled to the sidewalk, knocked out cold. Grant took the man's wallet and counted the money inside. Eighty-five dollars, not too bad. He handed the empty wallet to Steve who took it delightedly with a big toothy grin. The woman gasped, kneeling down to help her husband, and screamed as Sasquatch pulled her off him and flattened her out on the sidewalk. Grant produced a switchblade, and the blade flashed out and engaged with an ominous click. The woman backed up against the wall. Sasquatch pulled her out flat again, and Grant delicately cut her clothing off. Sasquatch chuckled, and drool ran out of the corner of his mouth. The woman whimpered. Grant slowly took off his sweater and then his green shirt. The woman wretched as she saw his upper body was covered in skin that resembled crocodile hide. The upper vertebrae of his spine appeared to protrude from his skin and glowed eerie in the lone streetlight.

He unbuckled the belt of his trousers when Sasquatch went down. Alex had silently returned and cut both his Achilles' tendons clean through, his machete flashing in the dark. Sasquatch cried out in agony and rocked back and forth while strewn on the sidewalk. Alex stood and faced Grant, his machete ready to strike. Grant's eyes reflected back iridescent blue. "I watch you, Grant," Alex said in disgust, "and this is what you are . . ." Grant was perspiring, the crocodile skin oozing a foul-smelling liquid. Alex cut a ten-by-ten-inch square of the reptilian skin off his chest and

held it on the end of his machete. "What happened to your tail? Somebody already cut it off?" Alex said sarcastically. It was deathly silent. The woman watched the drama play out in horror. "All the time you call me names," Alex uttered, digging into his pocket then laying the fingers of the store clerk that he had cut off earlier at Grant's feet. Thumb, one, two, three, four, five—six in total. Grant looked at the fingers, his eyes wide, and swallowed. "You are nothing but a fucking *mutant!*" Blood was seeping from the cuts that Alex had inflicted. His throat was dry, but he managed enough to spit in Alex's face. "Fuck you, Grant, you *mutant son of a bitch!*" Alex raised the machete high, and as the woman screamed, Alex wielded the machete in a deadly crescent, instantaneously slicing through Grant's neck, decapitating him, the head rolling along the sidewalk into the gutter, his body crumpling at the knees first then falling forward, the blood spewing out in orgasmic gushes onto the dark road.

The woman's shriek was cut short as she fixed Alex's eyes with hers. "Lady, I am sorry, but look at me," He tore open his shirt and held it open for her to see. "*Look at me,*" he shouted at the top of his lungs, arms stretched out and head back, tears streaming from his eyes. He was wearing a silver Catholic crucifix and a Catholic brown scapular around his neck. She could clearly see the heavily raised outline of a parasitic twin's face just protruding from behind his stomach, making grimacing faces; its hands tearing at the inside of his stomach trying to get out, and his mouth against the inside of his skin, seeming to form words with

its mouth. "I am a mutant!" he screamed, spittle flying, shouting through agonizing tears; the woman held a look of terrified disgust on her face, then uttered a sustained scream of pure terror. She was balled up against the wall and shaking, in incapacitating, catatonic shock.

"Forgive me for what I have to do." A dove fluttered above and came to rest on a darkened light post. And Alex, using the machete, slit his throat from ear to ear and dropped to the sidewalk; and the vision that lit his eyes left, and the terrible thing that was born into him was to some degree released. As for the twin, Alex had incomprehensibly spared its life, though fleeting; and as Alex lay dying, the lifeblood that sustained Alex also drained from the abomination that was part of him, and the judge, juror, and executioner died a cold and astounding death on a dark sidewalk in a part of town that mattered to nobody.



## Chapter 7

*My friends are all dead,  
Their souls have all fled,  
Their dreams are all shred,  
Their essences' all unsaid.*

### Making It Right

Grace Etheridge lived on a small acreage about five miles outside of Lewiston, Maine. Lewiston was about sixty miles north of Portland and about sixty miles from the coast. It was beautiful country. There were well-defined seasons; summer was hot, fall was warm and the colors beautiful, winter was picturesque and cold, and spring was a celebration of the cycle starting all over again.

Grace was a hardworking woman all of her eight decades of life. She had been a very attractive woman, with blue eyes and long flowing blonde hair. She had raised a family of eight under the hand of a mean, alcoholic man who had a penchant for beating on her and the kids when his money had run out and they had kicked him out of the bar. He never had a real job, so he did odds and ends in Lewiston. More often than not, the meager money he made went directly to drink, leaving Grace to feed and clothe the children without any real income. She would rely on the kindness of neighbors, the women's auxiliary at the church, the Salvation Army, and a huge garden she and the kids

planted every year to see them through. He always thought she was not doing an adequate job, so he would beat her regularly. The kids would watch as he pummeled their mother. He would wind up and hit her like a punching bag. She had her nose broken numerous times, her arms had been broken, ribs and her collarbone; it was always out of the question that she should receive any medical care in town, because in his words, "Who would look after the kids?" In fact, she was almost always in a state of healing while enduring regular beatings. One of the children, Emily May, when she was around ten years old, would collect the teeth that Dad would punch out of Mum's mouth so that she could get money from the tooth fairy for them. Sometimes, when Grace got up in the morning, she would look at herself in the mirror, at the ugly black and blue bruises and cuts, and remember the beauty that used to look back at her.

In the fall, Grace and the kids would harvest the huge garden they had planted: potatoes, carrots, beans, peas, cucumbers, onions, turnips, dill, tomatoes, radishes, lettuce, cabbage, kale, beets, zucchini, celery, broccoli, and corn, along with many different herbs. It would sometimes take two weeks to harvest the bounty and weeks to wash, prepare, preserve, pickle, and otherwise store the vegetables. Sometimes her husband would come back from town liquored up and stagger behind the house where the harvesting was going on and piss all over the vegetables and slur, "There, that's whuddi think of yur fuggn gerden." He would take a few shots at Grace, but she could elude him

outside and he would just fall down drunk, roll down a slope, and pass out under the willow tree. The harvest was cleaned, prepped, preserved, and packed away into the cellar and basement.

In the cold Maine winters, Grace would take in alterations and even dressmaking to make extra money, and she was very good at it. The sewing machine could be heard until four or five in the morning some days, providing a meager but steady revenue stream. She also enjoyed knitting, and her fingers and knitting needles would fly, making gloves, hats, and scarves for her children and then for other nameless children who were too poor to have such luxuries as a gloves, hats, and scarves in the cold Maine winters. Grace would nod her head while knitting and repeat over and over, "Puts things right with God. Puts things right with God." It was soothing to watch, soothing to listen to. She would bring in boxes of beautifully knitted winter wear to the church when she was allowed to attend. Her husband would drive them to church and wait in the car while she delivered the clothing and attended mass. It was something she had to do to "save her soul," she explained to him.

He was always very anxious about taking her anywhere in public. The ladies at the church would thank Grace for her donation of time, effort, and love, and ask her about the deep purple and black bruises under her eyes and on her arms. Grace would reply it was from her husband "beat'n on her" but that she couldn't do anything about it. For the sake

of the family, she had to endure the abuse to keep the family together. The women at the church pleaded with her to seek help, and she always said that she would, but the cycle remained the same. When she came back to the car, he would immediately reach over and grab her wrist, twist it and growl, "Did you say anything?" "Of course not," would be her reply, and they would drive in silence. She felt dead inside in his presence. She hated him, for what he did to her, but also for what he did to the family. She hated him for not being all the things a father should be in a family: brave, reliable, a good provider, and most of all a loving father. All he was was a cowardly, opportunistic marauder.

As the kids grew, they followed his lead. The violence they saw always seemed to get their father what he wanted. They became less and less willing to help Grace with chores and the planting and the harvesting of the garden, instead leaving the house and heading to Lewiston for the afternoon or even days on end. Grace had no way of tracking the kids. Some of the older kids would demand money from Grace, and when she could not produce any, would slap her across the face and punch her in the stomach. Sometimes they would descend upon her like a pack of wolves, kicking her while she was down and laughing hysterically. On one occasion they had ganged up on Grace looking for money, and not receiving any had punched her and kicked her on the ground and had smashed all of the garden preserves that were left while laughing hysterically. Grace was a hardened woman, but this event reduced her to tears. The kids left the

house, and she was in pain alone. She cleaned herself up, washed the blood off her face, stopped the blood flowing from her nose, sat in her knitting chair, and knitted all night. She was thankful that neither the kids nor her husband came home that evening.

The next morning there was a pounding at the door. Grace had fallen asleep while knitting and was temporarily disoriented. "Police, come to the door!" Grace felt in a dream as she opened the door. There were two uniformed police officers and her husband at the door. "Can we come in, ma'am?" one asked. They stepped into the house and the officer continued, "I am sorry to inform you that two of your children were involved in an automobile accident last night . . ." Grace slumped into a chair, slipping into shock as he continued, "John and Patrick were killed instantly by the oncoming train before they could cross the tracks. I am sorry for your loss." The officers left. Her husband had apparently been thrown into the drunk tank earlier that evening, so they brought him along as it was convenient. "What did you do to those kids to make 'em leave like that?" he growled, fists at his sides. Her head wobbled over to his direction, her eyes not really seeing anything. "What did you do to those kids?" he barked. She moved her lips but no words came, and he hit her with a vicious right hook to the chin that knocked her out cold. It was probably the only act of mercy he ever committed.

Grace sacrificed everything in the world that was given to her and everything she had for the sake of her family and

others when she had more to give. The house and land belonged to Grace outright. It had belonged to her grandparents on her father's side and had been willed to her with the codicil that it not be sold or subdivided as long as Grace was married to her husband. Grace had become pregnant at fifteen (the event was more like a rape) and her parents and her grandparents had gotten a good feel for the quality of the man that she was involved with. It was all the family could do to tolerate him. Grace's grandfather hated the man. Thing is, Grace was raised Catholic, and had even considered becoming a nun. In her mind, the only right thing to do in the eyes of God was to marry the man that was the father of her child. Her parents objected but couldn't really argue the point because that is how they raised her and she was doing the right thing in the eyes of God. And so they were married, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad.

As she got older, the children were no less abusive, but one by one they left the house for good. Her husband died of a heart attack when she was sixty-nine, and she had three children left at home. As she got ready for the funeral, she looked into the mirror, and an old woman with hollow eyes looked back at her. She went to the funeral with two broken arms in homemade casts. They lowered her husband into the ground in a plywood coffin. Only the children still living at home came to the funeral. The other three didn't show. She couldn't put a symbolic shovelful of dirt on the casket, so she spat on it instead. A few of his alcoholic cronies

showed up from Lewiston, and some women from the church came to support Grace. The wake was held at the house, where a drunken fist fight broke out between two of her late husband's friends. When they all left, it was quiet. The three children at home went into town to go to a movie or get drunk or get laid—it was all the same.

She scaled back the size of the garden that was planted every year, primarily because she had to do the majority of the work. She continued to do alterations and knitting. She found that she had more time to knit and continued to knit clothing and blankets for the poor, still nodding her head, "Puts things right with God. Puts things right with God." Thing is, beautiful metaphors like knitting for the poor and making things right with God are just that—metaphors—they don't come true. Grace was into her seventies when the last of the children left the house. The beatings stopped. She healed physically. The beatings stopped and Grace realized that she was emotionally devastated. All that she had worked for, all that she had sacrificed, had been for naught. Not one of her children had turned out to be a decent human being. She turned to her faith to help heal the emotional wounds. It held nothing for her.

She was well into her eighties when two of her children came over to the house. They hadn't been to the house in years. You could see Lewiston from the kitchen window now, and the twenty acres upon which the house sat was literally worth a fortune. They came in unannounced, as always, and began asking her about her will. Did she have one? Where

was it? What was in it? Grace replied that it was none of their business if she had a will or not; and if she did, she would not tell them what its contents would be. One of them slapped Grace across the face, causing her nose to bleed. "Please leave," Grace pleaded, looking away. The pillagers ransacked the house looking for a will, and not finding one, left. After they had left, Grace looked in the mirror. She wondered when it was when she had looked *so old*. She was bent over from years of hard work and crooked from years of physical abuse. She telephoned the police and described what happened. A female officer came over to the house and advised her to get a restraining order against the kids and to have the locks changed on the doors. Grace followed the advice and the next day made arrangements for the locks to be changed, then she went into town to the courthouse to have restraining orders taken out on her children. Her kids were enraged when served the restraint papers and came over anyway, and they pounded on the doors and whined like hyenas when they could not get in. Grace called the police, and the kids were forced off the property under threat of arrest.

Some weeks later, an officer came to the door with three of the children. He explained that she was to be assessed for mental acuity and the ability to live on her own. In other words, the children were seeking power of attorney over her affairs. The officer drove her into Lewiston and they met with a psychologist, psychiatrist, and a medical doctor. They asked her a series of questions: "What year is it?" "What

month is it?" "Who is the current president?" "How many children do you have?" "How old are you?" "What is twenty-five times one hundred?" and a whole lot more. They assessed her medical condition as well. After all the questioning and examination, there was no doubt that Grace was keen of mind and in possession of all her faculties. The officer drove her back home. Later that night, Grace was knitting in her chair when the telephone rang. She picked it up. It was one of the children. "Listen, you old bitch, we've drawn up your will and you're going to sign it." The heated exchange lasted for about fifteen agonizing minutes, with dire threats made if she didn't sign the bogus document.

It was winter, and every other day one of the children would be on the phone tormenting her to sign the will or create one under the direction of her children. It was the land that they wanted of course. The land that her grandparents had given to her. The grandparents that loved her and never hit her, the grandparents who were always happy to see her, the grandparents that called her "Gracey," the grandparents that she loved. She stopped and looked into the mirror at the bent-over, frail old lady with sunken eyes looking back at her. She tried to recall if her grandmother had looked that old. She remembered her grandmother's smell—she always smelled like fresh roses. Grace closed her eyes, tilted her head back, and thought of the choices that she had made through her life, and what those life choices had given back to her in return. She was

raised Catholic and loved God, but she couldn't help but think that life had been cruel to her. She pondered this in silence for several minutes. She was eighty-five years old—what reward could there possibly be that would make right all the suffering and wrongs that she had endured? She dismissed the train of thought entirely. A lifetime of abuse had taught her that fairy tales never come true. So she sat down in her knitting chair and commenced knitting, nodding her head, “Puts things right with God. Puts things right with God.” It was such a monotonous routine, but it seemed to be what Grace needed: monotony to take her mind away from the ugliness which had been her every waking day. It forced her brain into neutral where it could idle and repair the continual emotional damage.

Grace thought that as long as she was alive, her children would torment her in their lust for her wealth. She couldn't see any way around it. She had to do something if she wanted to be able to live the rest of her life in peace. She thought long and hard and finally picked up the telephone and called one of the children. The next day, two of them came over straightaway. They were very upbeat and almost giddy. Grace let them in the house and they sat at the kitchen table and a briefcase was put on the table. They opened it and took out a will that they had drawn up, and expected her to sign. Grace read the document very carefully. It stated that when she died or had to be put into a long-term facility, the ownership of the Etheridge land and house would transfer to the six remaining children. She read the

document over and over. Finally, Grace signed it. One of the children went to hug her, but she asked them both to leave.

Once they left, she sat at the kitchen table and contemplated what she had done, and closing her eyes begged her grandparents for forgiveness. She suddenly felt extremely tired and went to lie down. She lay down and closed her eyes and dropped off to sleep and began to dream. She dreamed that she was a little girl playing in the backyard of her grandparents' house. It was wintertime and Grandpa was clapping his hands and saying, "Where's my angel Gracey?" She was making snow angels in the snow. Grandma was watching her and smiling, and the smell of gingerbread was coming from the kitchen of the house. Grace opened her eyes and blinked a few times as reality set in. Coffee she had put on was ready. She got up and poured herself a cup. She went back to her knitting and nodding of her head, "Puts things right with God. Puts things right with God."

It had been four years since she heard from the children. Once they had gotten what they wanted, they never contacted her since, Grace thought bitterly. They couldn't commit her, so they were just going to wait until she died. It was mid-January and Maine was experiencing an unseasonably cold winter. Temperatures were hovering between five and ten below and there had been a lot of snowfall. The days were short and the nights were long. Grace kept in contact with a few of the ladies from the church that she had befriended over the years while

donating knitted goods to charity. It had been a peaceful four years, and Grace appreciated the peace as a gift.

Grace looked at the calendar and smiled as she noted that she would be eighty-nine years old the following week. At eighty-nine, she felt that it was time to make things right. Four years of peace had given her time to think, to reflect, to wonder, and to plan. The time was right. She smiled—she felt good inside. She had finished knitting a blanket that had taken her about two years to complete. She had her name, Gracey, embroidered all along the edges of the blanket. She was at peace with the beatings she had endured, and the choices she had made, and the children that were hers. She closed her eyes and brought the blanket up to her nose and breathed it in and smiled. She felt good inside. She got up and telephoned the district health office and made an appointment for the district nurse to come by and give her a flu shot the next day.

It was a cold day, and soft snow was gently falling. She made herself a cup of tea and had a couple of gingerbread cookies. She washed, brushed her teeth, put on makeup, and brushed her long grey hair. She put on a pretty blouse and a beautiful deep blue skirt with delicate embroidery that she had made herself. She put on a red knitted sweater she had also made and opened the door and went outside. She carried the blanket with her. A blast of cold air hit her, but she could hardly contain her joy; she was humming a tune as she walked around to the back of the house where she had done the harvest for so many years. She turned

around and around in the snow with her arms out, laughing out loud saying, "I'm putting things right with God!" She lay down in the snow and made a snow angel, laughing and crying at the top of her lungs, "I'm putting things right with God!" over and over. She picked a fresh spot in the snow, and in the pristine powder, she laid down. She wrapped herself in the blanket that she had made. The sun had gone down, and the temperature dropped. As the cold gripped her, it stopped her beating heart, and Grace was no longer there to be beaten, bullied, and desecrated.

The next day, the public nurse came and found Grace frozen to death behind the house wrapped in a blanket. The death appeared unusual, and the coroner was called, and her children were called. The children were in a palpable state of high excitement, due to what they stood to inherit. The coroner, examining the body at the scene, began to examine the blanket that Grace was wrapped in. It was unlike anything he had ever seen. It appeared to be hand knitted, but the detail was incredible. He brushed some snow off near the neckline and looked at it and read aloud, "I, Grace Etheridge, hereby make, publish, and declare this as My Last Will and Testament . . . The whole blanket is her will, dated yesterday," he said in disbelief. The unusual will was examined at the coroner's office and went on to declare that the property and the house would be sold, and the proceeds of that sale would go into a trust fund that benefits organizations that help victims of domestic violence. The fabric will was examined by the Lewiston

public affairs office and found to be good and upstanding in every way.

Grace Etheridge was a kind, hardworking woman who put things right with God.





## Chapter 8

Mind those around you, especially your friends,  
The devil doesn't always cast his own shadow,  
Be careful how far your friendship extends.  
Spend an eternity you cannot outgrow

### The Preacher Man

John Taylor was a preacher man. He was known to preach all over the Southern states and as far up as Nevada, Missouri, and Indiana. Thing is, once preacher man John Taylor come to your town to preach, you don't ever forget it. He never had a car, but he would wander into a town and walk right up to the church rectory door and knock on it with his staff, and he would explain that he was passing through and would they mind too terribly much if he could help out on a Sunday preaching to the converted and those who needed converting. Well, how could anybody say no to the good preacher? "John Taylor, if you please." He was a tall man and wore dark clothing—a dark trench coat and a dark dress hat. He looked like a cowboy from a Western at first glance, but he had an aura about him that radiated something spiritual. When he removed his hat out of politeness, he had long, wavy, salt and pepper hair. His eyes were black, and when he looked into your eyes, it was like he was looking into your very soul. He used a hand-carved staff of white wood that was decorated with symbols

depicting the story of the Bible. He claimed it eased the pain of himself and others when he walked. He travelled with a bag containing a change of clothes, his preacher vestments, holy oil and holy water, some tobacco, some brandy, a mirror, a .22 caliber handgun, some bullets, a Bible, a leather-bound journal which he wrote in every day, shaving supplies, and a few other containers with unknown contents. The bag smelled like tobacco, baby powder, and leather.

On this particular occasion, he had wandered up a dusty road in Columbia, North Carolina, on a hot August summer afternoon and knocked on the rectory door next to the church with his staff. He stood for a few moments wiping sweat out of his eyes with a handkerchief. He could hear an occupant coming to the door. The door opened slowly, and an older man behind the door looked up at him, "Yes, can I help you?" "Why yes, I'm hoping you can. I'm a preacher myself, a travelling preacher, and I was looking for a set down for a couple of days and was wondering if I could help spread the Word here in your beautiful little town," he said smiling. The resident priest behind the door smiled and opened the door so that the stranger might come in, "Please, come in, come in, make yourself at home. What's your name?" "John Taylor, sir." "I'm Myles, Myles Shuster," he said meekly, "My wife Maryanne is around here somewhere." The priest called for her upstairs then outside in the backyard where she was gardening. "What is it, Myles?" Maryanne said, then seeing they had a guest, she covered her chest with a gloved

hand, "Very glad to meet you, Mr. Taylor." "It's just John, ma'am," the preacher said. "Well, John, can I get you a glass of lemonade?" Myles's wife asked. "That would be lovely," replied the preacher. While Maryanne was preparing lemonade, Myles asked the preacher if he would like a drink. "Surely I would. I've walked thirty miles today alone," the preacher said, "and I am thirsty." Myles nodded and reached behind the couch and pulled out a bottle of Southern Comfort bourbon and poured two eight-ounce glasses and drank to each other's health.

John Taylor was invited to stay for supper with Myles and his Maryanne. Naturally the topic of the preacher's travels came up. "You were saying you walked thirty miles just today to get here," Myles said. "That's right," said John Taylor. "Remarkable," said Maryanne. "I'd just come from Bishopville, east of here, where I exorcised eight people in the course of a week and converted one hundred fifty in the ways of the Lord," Taylor said. "Oh my," Myles and Maryanne said together. Maryanne lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, watching the grey blue smoke curl its way to the ceiling like an unclean spirit. "Prior to that I was further East in Florence, performing baptisms and cleansing the entire town from an evil spirit that lived in the ground water for centuries—poisoning it, reaping souls for the devil, deforming beautiful babies that were born to good and decent Christian folk." John Taylor took a sip of lemonade and continued, "The evil spirit entered their justice folk and they threw me in jail, but myself and the whole town prayed

to deliver me out of the hands of the demon that incarcerated me,” John continued. “There was an uprising on account of the prayer, and almost all the townsfolk descended on the jail demanding my release,” John’s voice rose as he spoke, “The justice folk also experienced a conversion to the ways of Jesus and freed me. It was miraculous.”

After I got out, we went to the place where the water springs out of the ground that very night and holding up his staff, brought it crashing to the ground and claimed it in the name of Jesus!” When the white staff came down striking the hardwood floor, dust flew, the whole house shook, and the dishes on the shelves clattered. Both Myles and Maryanne nearly jumped out of their seats. “Well,” said Myles, “Your timing is impeccable. Tomorrow is Sunday and we have church services starting at 11:00. I’d be ever so grateful if you could help me out.” “Father Myles, it would be an honor,” John Taylor replied. It was getting late in the afternoon, and they shared a simple meal of fish, beans, and fresh salad from their garden. After dinner, they talked for a time about John Taylor’s further travels until the sun was setting.

John Taylor was offered the guest bedroom upstairs that night, which he humbly accepted. After he left the kitchen table, it was silent. Myles and Maryanne did not speak to one another. The kitchen clock could be heard ticking. There was a tension in the house that afternoon that was like something heinous had entered a window that had

mistakenly been left open. As the sun slowly lowered in the sky, the colors seemed to intensify all around. Maybe it's because the sun wasn't beating down so hard, bleaching the color out of everything, but shining modestly so the rich color could be seen painted from nature's pallet everywhere. As the sun continued to set, shadows of preposterous length cast their veil across the surface. Crucifixes' shadows in the cemetery behind the church lined up like soldiers then laid down. A black crow landed on the spire of the church and cawed.

The next day dawned beautiful. The sky was painted blood red. The sun looked like a red waxen host viewed through waves of an ocean. John Taylor leaned on the ledge of the window looking out and breathed in the clean morning air. The smell of flowers and baking bread, dew and moisture, filled the air. The aroma of coffee filled the house. John Taylor got dressed in front of the mirror as if mesmerized at what he saw and came downstairs to greet his hosts. "In the name of God, good morning!" he boomed. The greeting startled his hosts. "Good morning, John," they replied back. John seemed energized, with the power of ten men. "I'm making breakfast," Maryanne said, "would you like some bacon and eggs?" "Why, that would be wonderful," John replied. John Taylor helped himself to a cup of coffee. "John, the service starts at 11:00 sharp. For today's sermon, I'm going to talk about the importance of Jesus walking with us in our everyday life, and providing the strength and healing we need that only Jesus and the Father

can provide,” Myles explained. They went into the living room to discuss what Father Myles had planned in detail and the sequence of the service. “Healing is a powerful theme, Myles. I have been blessed by a lot of healing through my life. I think I can add some value and add to what you speak on. I’ll keep it simple,” John replied. “Sounds good, John. It’s a fine congregation; I think you’ll like it,” Myles stated.

They ate breakfast, finished cleaning up the dishes, and got ready for the service. John Taylor went upstairs to shave and get ready. He shaved in the bathroom and put on a skin tonic. He then went into his room and put his leather bag on his bed. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He looked at his hands, first the backs, then the palms. He looked at them critically, holding them up to the light, then looked at his arms the same way, then examined his chest for a long time in the mirror. John Taylor quietly spoke to himself, “This is a good thing, John. We have an opportunity to promote healing and growth in this community in the name of God.” Finally he put on a clean shirt and put on his vestments. They were brilliant white with a green cross in the front and back. He exited his room and stood at the top of the stairs.

Maryanne was standing at the bottom of the stairs about to mount them and was looking up at John Taylor. The sunlight caught him and he looked a mortal angel, tall and strong, with his staff in hand. Maryanne was fighting back thoughts of adultery. She climbed the stairs and squeezed

by John Taylor, her breasts rubbing against his chest. John Taylor simply said, "Ma'am," and climbed down the staircase and walked outside the rectory to enter the church.

It was a glorious day. The delicate scents of blooms carried on zephyrs of winds blended with fragrant leaves and rich black soils to create nature's most exquisite perfume. Birds were singing, flowers were in full bloom, and everywhere you looked the splendor of God's palette was on display. John Taylor opened one of the double doors and entered the church. It was dim, dry, and musty, smelling of ancient varnish and moth-eaten paper. There was dust on the top of the light fixtures, but the pews looked well used; and as he walked his way up the creaky center aisle to the front, humming "Battle Hymn of the Republic," Father Myles was there preparing the readings, readying the altar, and putting candles in place. "Good morning, John!" he said. "Good morning, Myles," John replied back, "Nice building you have here." "We've been using this building going on 147 years now," Myles said. "Sure is a beautiful day out today," John said. "I think it's the nicest day we've yet to have this summer, John. Its glorious!" "I'll light the candles, Myles," John said and lit the altar and other candles in preparation for the service. "A few spotlights wouldn't hurt in here, Myles," John said. "Do you think so?" Myles replied with surprise. "I think so," John replied.

The side door opened letting in a beam of white light, and the choir director, Mary Schaeffer, entered lugging music under one arm and a guitar under the other. "Good morning,

Father," she said. "Good morning, Mary. I have a guest to introduce to you," Myles stated. "Mary, this is John Taylor, he's a travelling preacher who is with us for a couple of days. And John, this is Mary, our choir director." Shortly after, the choir members arrived one by one, joined the band and began practicing. That was a part that John Taylor never liked. He thought it shattered the peace that existed between man and God, he thought it an abomination in the eyes of the Lord; a guitar pick'n, tambourine bang'n, drum bang'n ragtag bunch of noisemakers.

The church began to fill with people until around 11:00 AM the church was nearly full, and the service started. After a rousing hymn of "Faith of our Fathers," Father Myles began, "Welcome to you all in God's name. Today we have a special guest with us. He has traveled long and far to be with us. He is a fellow preacher. Please welcome Father John Taylor!" John Taylor stepped forward and put one hand forward. The congregation politely clapped. Father Myles began, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen." Father Myles opened the service with a call for God's forgiveness. "Let us all gather together as God's children and as God's children ask for his forgiveness for sin that we have committed both knowingly and unknowingly," Father Myles continued. Two readings from the Bible were read by parishioners from the congregation. Father Myles read the Gospel reading and paused, and then commenced to deliver his sermon. "My dear Parishioners. I want to speak to you today about suffering, and I want to

Speak to you today about healing. Every one of us has experienced both to some degree. We are all children of God, and as children of God, we are meant to emulate him and to follow him. My brothers and sisters in Christ, we are meant to walk with Jesus, to be with Jesus, to have Jesus in our hearts all the time. For Jesus is the true Healer, and it is Jesus who has the power to heal us from whatever it is that causes us pain and suffering. My brothers and sisters, love Jesus, walk with Jesus, invite him into your lives, and he will be your fountain of everlasting life." Father Myles spoke for about 20 minutes on the theme. After he finished his sermon, he sat down in a chair beside the altar.

John Taylor stood tall and straight, his arms and staff raised in the air, and in a booming voice proclaimed, "Some of our needs are small, Lord, and some of our needs are large, Lord!" He held his position with arms extended and eyes closed, and the congregation's eyes were on him. John Taylor continued, "Who, Lord, in this congregation of your children needs *healing today*?" he shouted the last two words. John Taylor repeated the petition, "Who, Lord, in this congregation of your faithful is in need of healing today? Cry out to the Lord, raise your hand!" Father Myles looked at John Taylor in disbelief. Slowly hands began to raise in the congregation. Pointing with his staff at a raised hand, "You!" John Taylor boomed, "What ails you?" A feeble voice came back, "I have lung cancer." "You!" John Taylor pointed to another hand in the congregation, "What ails you?" A tiny voice came back from the mass, "I had polio as a boy and I

can't walk." "And you!" John Taylor shouted, pointing to a hand in the congregation, "What ails you?" "I'm blind," came the reply. Hands were beginning to go up all throughout the congregation. "Our God," John Taylor proclaimed, "does not want this to be!" and he brought his staff crashing to the floor, with such force that dust fell off the lights and the cross hanging over the altar shook and slowly swung back and forth. The candles on the altar were also extinguished leaving paraffin smoke trails rising like lesser spirits. The congregation all jumped at the boom. John Taylor had descended from the altar and was now *one of the people*, touching the people, praising Jesus, praising the Holy Spirit. He walked to the front of the church and pronounced, "He wants us to be Children of the Light!" the preacher man said. With that, he opened the side door and let the shaft of white light penetrate the church. "Let us *show him* that we are *Children of the Light!*" John Taylor heralded, and he stood in the side door opening with the light shining behind him. He looked like he was a man transfigured. Parishioners began to follow him, casting sidelong glances at Father Myles until the entire congregation headed for the door. They gathered outside, in the sunshine and beauty of the summer day, giving thanks for the beauty all around them.

The congregation gathered around John Taylor. "We're going to have us a healing session right over by those oak trees," John Taylor said. There were picnic tables at the grove as well, so it made an ideal place to congregate. A gentle river flowed slowly behind the church and the picnic

tables, sparkling with light. John Taylor led the congregation of about four hundred to the grove. Those in most need of healing were lined up in front. Father Myles didn't know what to do, so he stood beside John Taylor. The blind man was seated carefully at a table, facing the river. The preacher man had a leather bound book of prayers on the table beside the blind man, open to prayers for the cure for blindness. A breeze gently ruffled the pages of the prayer book. The tension in the air was palpable. "Do you believe in Jesus, the Lord and Savior and only begotten Son?" John Taylor asked. "Yes," the man replied. "What is it you want the Lord Jesus to do for you today?" John Taylor asked, his eyes closed, his voice barely a whisper. "To see again," came the hoarse reply from the blind man. "I tell you that today your faith is going to heal you, and that the devil that sewed your eyes shut will no longer hold power over you in Jesus' name," John Taylor boomed. John Taylor laid his hands on the head of the blind man. There were people all around the blind man, shifting, trying to get a better view of the healing. John Taylor then began praying softly, lowly, looking at the sun, holding the staff in one hand. John Taylor suddenly rose up fully and brought the staff crashing down into the ground in front of the man. There was a loud exploding sound like thunder that echoed off the buildings nearby, and the man who hadn't seen in forty-five years opened his eyes and looked at the figure of John Taylor. The congregation screamed and cried. Father Myles passed out.

There was fear, hope, and anxiety in the air. John Taylor

performed three more healings that day. As the sun began to set, a spirit came among the people and the mood was celebratory. Again the shadows grew long and the congregation celebrated well into the night. Two pretty young girls, perhaps fourteen and fifteen, came to talk with the preacher man. John Taylor obliged and he and the girls walked down to the river and along its banks and talked about Jesus and healing. At a tall stand of feathery soft grass, they paused, the river gurgling behind him. A small colony of bats chased insects in the air against the background of a waning moon. John Taylor explained that sexual relations would help them understand the healing ways of the Lord, as the Holy Spirit would commune with them, gifting them with insight, joy and guidance. John Taylor had intercourse with them both in pillows of soft grass downriver where the girls' protests could not be heard. When he walked back to the church rectory, it was well past two in the morning. Father Myles was sitting in a chair. He nodded when John Taylor came in. John went to the liquor cabinet and grabbed an unopened bottle of scotch and a glass. He sat across from Myles. John Taylor started drinking; Father Myles was already drunk. "That was some preach'n," Myles said. "In a good way or a bad way?" John Taylor asked. "I really haven't made up my mind yet," Myles said. Myles passed out in his chair. John Taylor finished the bottle of scotch and went upstairs to his room.

When he entered his room, he found Maryanne in his bed. "Shhhh . . ." she said, putting her finger to her lips. John

Taylor slowly took off his robe, folded it, and put it in his bag. He took off his shirt and pants, folded them, and put them on a chair in the room. There was only the light of the moon in the bedroom. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him, then pulled away and looked at him in the moonlight. She had a puzzled look on her face. His body was not built like any man she had ever seen. She felt his chest and his back. His chest, the muscles and skin tone, even the amount of hair, were different on one side than the other. His back was like a patchwork of different skin types and muscle types. His legs were different as well. He seemed to be built out of more than one person, more likely two or three. He turned to her, hands open, "It's what I am." With that, John Taylor commenced to make love to Father Myles's wife three times that night.

The next morning, red light poured into the room from the rising sun. John Taylor got out of bed and looked out the window. "Red in the morning," he said. "You didn't have to do the girls like that, you didn't have to take their virginity," John Taylor said. He sat down on the corner of the bed. "*I did what we both wanted,*" John Taylor said. "*I can't stop doing something bad once I start, and you can't stop me, you know that,*" John Taylor said. He got up and brushed his hair, put on his shirt and pants, and went downstairs. Father Myles and Maryanne were at the kitchen table reading the newspaper. Neither of them would look at him. "Help yourself to some coffee, John," Maryanne said. John found a cup and poured a black coffee and sat at the kitchen table. "Dammit, what's

gotten into you folks? Did what happened out there yesterday scare you?" John demanded to know, slamming his hand on the table. "Well . . ." Myles stammered.

Just then the doorbell rang. Maryanne got up to get it. John Taylor leaned over the table until he was six inches from Myles's face and asked him, "Haven't you seen the power of the Holy Spirit unleashed before, Myles? Did it scare you?" John continued, holding his gaze. "It's like a wild tiger, and you have to know how to handle it or it'll rip you apart." Maryanne called out, "John Taylor, it's a group of people to see you." John Taylor got up and strode over to the front door. There were about fifteen people outside, pleading, asking him to come out and heal six people who were stricken with various diseases. "In the name of Jesus, God bless you all, but it's a Monday and I've got some pray'n of my own to do." He closed the door and went back to the kitchen table. "I'm going to go for a walk," John Taylor said, "clear my mind." "That's probably a good idea, John," Myles said, "We can have a chat when you get back." John put on his boots and slipped out the back door with his walking staff and started walking up the river.

John Taylor enjoyed walking. It was the peace and glory of God's creation that he enjoyed most. It gave him time to think and to figure things out. John Taylor was a *chimera*, which is a creature (or person) that is made up of genetically distinct cells from a different parentage. He was two completely different people merged into one body. In John Taylor's case, the chimera was so complex that it carried

with it two distinct personalities. They were body and minds of two men in one person. The rarity of such a thing is one in billions, but they do exist. John Taylor had been two distinct personalities all of his life. The two personalities shared the one body. They could talk to each other using words if they pleased, or could carry on a conversation completely within their minds.

“You let it get out of hand again. Way out of hand.”

*“I don’t think you minded it very much at all.”*

“Minded? Those girls were just children!”

*“And Maryanne?”*

“The priest’s wife? They let us into their house. We didn’t have to do that.”

*“But look at the miracles we performed.”*

“It’s the staff.”

*“I know it’s the staff, but still, look at the miracles. A miracle’s a miracle.”*

John Taylor kept walking along the river. “Why do you do such evil things?”

*“I just can’t control myself at the site of a beautiful woman.”*

“It’s not right, you know. We’ll both end up going to hell.”

*“That’s what you believe.”*

"It's true. And what if I end up in hell for what you've done?"

*"I'll gone ask the Lord to be merciful on your soul because I did the evil things."*

"What about those men in Lafayette? You didn't have to kill them."

*"Well, that was different."*

"No. It was not different. Those men did not deserve to die, and you killed them."

*"The coroner said they died of natural causes."*

"But it was close, John, real close."

*"I care about your soul too."*

"I know. You're a good man inside."

"We've been intertwined since we were born. We've tried to live a life that satisfies us both, but lately the bad things you do are getting worse. We're going to get caught."

*"Relax, we ain't gonna get caught. We work miracles, remember?"*

"And you work crimes, hurting people, taking advantage of people."

*"I think we give back more than we take."*

"It doesn't work that way. We are culpable for the sin that we commit. You're getting bolder. We're going to get caught."

*"It was dark with the girls and Maryanne."*

“But Maryanne did see the difference.”

“*She won’t say anything for the sake of Myles.*”

“I hope not.”

Myles and Maryanne sat at the kitchen table discussing yesterday’s service while people continuously came to the door looking for John Taylor. “Well, I think he’s got a gift, that’s for sure,” Myles stated. “But he’s a little bit creepy, don’t you think, Myles?” Maryanne replied, “He’s got an unnatural way of moving and talking.” “I’ll give you that, maybe even *supernatural*,” Myles replied. “And he has the power of the Spirit in him!” Myles finished. “How do you know it’s the power of the Spirit in him and not the power of something else?” Maryanne asked. She took out a cigarette and lit it, inhaling deeply. “He’s got skin on him like he’s been badly burned in an accident or something. All over his back, like a patchwork quilt . . . it’s eerie,” Maryanne said, looking out the window. Myles thought about that statement. “How do you know, Maryanne? I never saw his back or chest . . .” Myles asked. “I passed by his room when he was putting his shirt on,” she replied. “Strange . . .” Myles murmured. Maryanne nodded in agreement while looking out the kitchen window. “Here comes another bunch to see the preacher man.”

John Taylor judged it to be about 4:00 PM by the sun in the sky and figured he should turn back. He’d been walking since around ten in the morning. He should get back by 10:00 PM. He figured if he wasn’t welcome at the church anymore

when he got back, he would surely find one of the townsfolk more than willing to put him up. He would do a couple more healing sessions then move on.

About eight o'clock in the evening, Mr. and Mrs. Anderson and their daughter Allison came knocking at the rectory. "Come in, Mr. and Mrs. Anderson, come in. Hello, Allison." Father Myles held the door open for them. Maryanne appeared in the kitchen archway, "Would you like some coffee or something to eat?" "Coffee would be fine, thanks, Maryanne," said Mr. Anderson. They sat in the living room. "So, what brings you to the church at eight o'clock at night?" Father Myles asked. "We wouldn't come at this hour unless something was very wrong," Mr. Anderson replied. Father Myles knitted his brow. "What is the problem, Tom?" Father Myles asked, leaning forward in his chair and listened intently. Maryanne came out from the kitchen with steaming hot cups of coffee and then retreated. "It's about yesterday, Father, and your guest Preacher John Taylor," Mr. Anderson said. At this, Father Myles's blood ran cold. "What happened?" Father Myles asked. "Well, my daughter Allison and her friend Claire were having fun at the impromptu gathering. We were there, you were there, I think I saw Maryanne too," Mr. Anderson explained. He continued, "It was a nice night for some celebration and fellowship." "Yes, it was." Myles agreed.

Mr. Anderson continued, "At some point, Allison and Claire went to talk to John Taylor—you can take it from here, honey." "Well," Allison began, "we found John Taylor and

wanted to talk to him about the healings and how they work and stuff like that, and he says he'd love to talk about it. He asked us if we would like to walk with him along the river, so we did, and he talked about healing and God and the Holy Spirit and what it means to be a good Christian. We got to some tall grass and walked into it. It was soft and we all sat down and John Taylor talked. Then he put his hands on my shoulders and made me lay down while he took my clothes off. He raped me." Allison, crying, continued, "He did the same to Claire, but Claire started to scream, and he put his hand on her mouth really hard so she couldn't make a sound and raped her. He hurt her, there was blood." Allison finished, crying, while her mother comforted her. "He said it was the will of the Spirit." Allison added.

"Father Myles," Mr. Anderson said, "my daughter is only thirteen years old. That's statutory rape. My God in heaven, what evil have you wrought upon our town? Where is he now?" Anderson demanded to know. "He's out walking right now, Tom. I'll phone the police and have him arrested as soon as he returns," Father Myles said. Allison, in a weak and tiny voice asked Father Myles if he would hear her confession. "Of course I will hear your confession, Allison. I'll just get my stole."

Father Myles phoned the police and reported what had happened. The police asked the Shusters if they could phone them when John Taylor returned, then they could come out and arrest him. "I guess I was mistaken about John," Myles mused, "I *wanted* him to be remarkable, to be

extraordinary, like an angel. Instead we let a rapist and who knows what else into our home, into our congregation.” Maryanne, wanting to change the topic, offered, “But the miracles he performed were real, weren’t they?” “I don’t know, Maryanne, I don’t know.” “Myles, I’m going to check his bag and see what he has brought into our house.” Myles was hesitant but agreed and followed his wife up the stairs to the guest bedroom. The room was spotless and tidy. John Taylor’s bag had been placed in the closet, and Maryanne lifted it out and put it on the bed. The bag was locked, so Myles fetched a heavy gauge screwdriver and a hammer and broke the lock off the bag. The bag was packed neat and tidy. They began going through his things—clothing, aftershave, lather, a straight razor, a gun with bullets, a Bible that Maryanne grabbed and started looking through. The Bible had extensive notations throughout it, and there were newspaper articles of fugitives wanted in various murders, rapes, and muggings from a multitude of locations across the Southern states. Myles found his journal and gave it a cursory once over. It appeared to be a detailed record of his travels across the country. Myles randomly stopped at one page and read:

*“Performed a healing ceremony in Bryan, Texas.  
Healed eight people of the demons that occupied  
their souls.”*

Then in a different hand was written:

*“Went with a group of young ladies to experience the glory of God.”*

Beneath the entry, there were excellent sketches of five young pretty girls in pencil.

Maryanne was half listening to Myles reading from the journal as she went through John Taylor’s other things. She examined the pistol and some small religious publications. Myles flipped to the entry in the journal for for the previous day.

*“Assisted at church service with Father Myles Shuster. Had an impromptu healing session outside where we performed four healings, including a blind man, a man with polio, and a man with cancer. Afterwards, a spontaneous celebration was enjoyed whilst the Lord was praised and fellowship shared by all.”*

Beneath that in a different hand was written:

*“Laid down with two beautiful young girls. Concubines, both of them. Showed them the glory*

*of God.”*

Beneath the entry, an excellent sketch of Allison and Claire in pencil.

In the same handwriting was written:

*“When I returned to the rectory, Myles’s wife Maryanne was in my bed; I fucked her three times that evening. Unquenchable whore.”*

Beneath the entry was a sketch of Maryanne with the face scribbled out. Father Myles read that passage over three times, and he was in complete shock. Maryanne still hadn’t listened. Myles grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her, and shouting demanded, “Is this true, Maryanne? Did you sleep with John Taylor three times according to his journal?” Maryanne turned beet red in embarrassment and shame, then she transitioned into righteous anger. “Of course not, Myles!” she shouted back with anger and tears in her eyes. “Who are you going to believe, a rapist or your wife?” But Myles persisted, “I don’t think he had reason to make this up, Maryanne.”

“How *dare* you accuse me of such a thing, Myles, how *dare* you!” Maryanne shouted back.

Meanwhile, John Taylor had made it back to the church and had noticed people in his room moving around. He

stood beneath the window in the quiet of night and listened to Myles and Maryanne fighting. John Taylor, quiet like a specter, entered the rectory, crept upstairs and stood outside his open door listening to the argument that was going on. Myles pressed the point, "Everything is accurate in this journal, so there's no reason to doubt you did sleep with him." "Let the police deal with him when they get here," Maryanne replied.

John Taylor could see that they were going through his personal belongings. The journal was of course most damning, but he kept "Fugitive Wanted" signs folded neatly inside his Bible, and Maryanne was going through that. John Taylor was mere feet from his bedroom, standing against the wall in the darkened hallway. He was whispering a conversation to himself.

*"They've seen everything, John—the journal, the 'man wanted' posters, the newspaper clippings, everything."*

*"I really don't know what to do, John. Maybe it's time we faced justice for all the ugly things we've done."*

*"That's not going to work for me, John. I'm not done living. We have to kill this couple."*

*"After all they did for us, they don't deserve to die."*

*"Well, we don't deserve to live, but we will. It's nature's way."*

*"This is do or die time again, John. We've been here before. It's no*

*different.”*

“John, I’m begging you, don’t do this. We can find a better way.”

*“Thing is, John, you can’t stop me. I’m more powerful than you are.”*

“You’re comparing good and evil. The works I have done in my life more than make up for what you’ve done.”

*“So I’m going to do what needs to be done, and we’ll both do works another day.”*

With that, John Taylor stood in the doorway to the room. At first, Myles and Maryanne did not notice him while going through his belongings. Out of the corner of his eye, Myles caught sight of John Taylor and went limp, all the blood draining from his face. Maryanne, kneeling at the bed, noticed him and was transfixed looking at him without emotion, catatonic. *“So what is the idea of insidiously going through my personal belongings while I was out for a walk?”* John Taylor asked. He continued, *“These papers and these belongings are of a private nature, and I believe my traveling bag was locked.”* Myles managed to regain some of his composure, “Well, John, tell me what kind of a man it takes to rape a thirteen-year-old and a fourteen-year-old girl?” John Taylor replied, *“I can assure you, Myles, that I have done no such thing. Like any man, I celebrate the differences between the sexes, and in most states of the union, the age of consent is eighteen, and under no circumstances did I have relations with any woman under the age of eighteen.”* “It’s all here in your journal, John. That girl that

you had relations with was thirteen. She came to the church to seek absolution from her sins, from sins you made her commit." "And tell me, Myles," John asked, "did you read in my journal that on my return from the celebration I had sex with your wife three times that evening? Your bitch is uncontrollable," John Taylor declared. "Is this true, Maryanne?" Myles asked his wife. Maryanne wept uncontrollably. "So, Myles, what comes next?" "Why did you do these things, John, I'd like to know why." Without a word, John Taylor unbuttoned his shirt and removed it.

Myles gasped in horror. John Taylor's entire body was a patchwork like a calico cat. There were places where the hair was so thick it could be shaved with a razor, and patches ranging from dark brown to almost white. "Dear God in Heaven," Myles murmured, "you are a living incarnation of a legion of demons." John Taylor replied, "No, there are only two of us. I am the preacher. The other inside of me is responsible for mortal sin and heinous acts of the flesh. We are a chimera—two genetically different men in one body," John said, "It's what we are, it's what I am," John stated. "You are the devil incarnate!" Myles spat out, "By the power of Jesus, I command you out of my house!" "Or what, Myles? What's the next move?" John Taylor asked. "I've already called the police and they are on their way to pick you up for the crimes against those girls, and lots more according to your journal. You're gonna fry in the electric chair, John Taylor!" Myles said with delight and life in his eyes. John Taylor became enraged. He stepped over to Myles and threw him

up against the wall, and holding him off the ground with an elbow under his chin, plunged his hand into Myles's torso just under the rib cage and ripped out his beating heart. John Taylor's eyes fixed on Myles's eyes as he watched the life drain out of him. *"That's what I love, John, spilling warm lifeblood. There's nothing like it."* John Taylor was seething. He turned his attention to Maryanne. *"So, Maryanne, would you like to get it on with the preacher man? You want some of the good stuff? Some of the forbidden stuff?"* John Taylor taunted Maryanne. She was still in a state of shock. She opened her mouth to scream, and John Taylor thrust his staff through her mouth, breaking her neck and killing her instantly. The room was a horrific scene of blood and lingering terror.

"Why, John, why?" John Taylor asked as they were putting their belongings back into the travelling bag. *"I told you that's what I was gonna do, and I right gone and did it."*

"But you took the man's beating heart out of his chest, John. Are you possessed?"

*"Well, John, you're the expert in that department."*

*"I just get a feeling I can't make go away that I have to do it like that."*

"John, I'm really worried. This is the worst thing you've ever done."

*"Time will take care of that, John Taylor. I got lots of potential left."*

John Taylor finished packing his belongings into his travelling bag and bound it shut with wire. John Taylor loaded the pistol with six bullets and put it in his belt.

“We’d better get going,” John Taylor said, “The cops will be all over here in a matter of hours. I think it’s best we head North, like Missouri or Nebraska.”

*“I agree. Best to head North.”*

John Taylor closed the door to the bedroom and exited the house. It was about 11:30 PM, the moon was obscured, and the night was very dark. John Taylor walked out of the town and began to follow back routes North. John Taylor had an uncanny navigational ability. He came across some tall grass and laid down to rest. It must have been four in the morning when he put his head down. The two Johns had different thought patterns running through their minds. If one mind was quiet, the echo of the other’s thoughts could be heard, like a radio tuned to a distant station. John Taylor could feel evil thoughts running through John’s mind. The “depraved” John’s mind was racing with plans for finding a cafeteria early in the morning, eating a hearty breakfast, and doing some despicable acts should the occasion arise. He let his mind run through iteration after iteration of evil act he could perform on a cafeteria waitress or young woman. The “righteous” John’s mind was racing too. He had noted for months now how John’s lust for malevolent and heinous

behavior had increased in frequency and degree. He was trying to think of a way to put an end to it, for the sake of John's soul and his own. And for the sake of all those whom he intended to maim, harm, and kill. He had the loaded pistol in the waist of his pants and had come to the conclusion that the only way to stop him was to kill him. Of course intentional suicide was a sin, but he had a feeling for what parts were more his own and what parts were more John's. John Taylor fell asleep for a couple of hours. He awoke just when the dawn was approaching. He got up, stretched, and resumed travelling north.

The "righteous" John Taylor was very careful not to contemplate the plan to kill John. He was aware that the "depraved" John was contemplating evil acts when they got to a town; it always made him feel sick. They walked into the small town of Hertford, North Carolina, just as the sun was breaking over the horizon. The town smelled good. There was the smell of black fertile earth, flower gardens, and parked automobiles. As the sunlight spilled over the horizon, it painted a horizontal stripe red between heaven and earth. As the sun rose, the red bled, ran, and stained the horizon; and the wheels of creation slowly shifted to daytime mode. "Red in the morning," John Taylor muttered.

As John Taylor walked down the main street of the town, he stopped to pick an apple from an apple tree. As he reached for it, he withdrew the pistol from his waistband, put the barrel into his mouth, and fired three rounds into his palate. John Taylor dropped to the ground, bleeding from his

mouth. He opened his eyes, but his vision was fuzzy. He pushed himself up to a sitting position leaning against the apple tree. His ears were ringing and his head was pounding, but in a whisper he heard, *"Why did you try to kill me, John?"* "Because I love you, John. You were sending your soul right to hell." *"But I'm still alive in spirit."* "But you can't control me anymore, you can't commit evil acts anymore. I can save your soul."

John Taylor knew he couldn't stay sitting at the foot of the apple tree as he would draw too much attention to himself, and the police were likely looking for him across the state. He got up, leaning heavily on his staff, walked a dozen more blocks, and came to a cafeteria. He went inside and ordered coffee, bacon, and eggs. As he was waiting, he could feel parts of the other John Taylor becoming unresponsive. John Taylor had been a carefully choreographed performance when they were both fully alive. The waitress brought John Taylor his breakfast. As he ate it, his midsection seized violently. *"You needed me to live, John. Without me, you can't survive."* John Taylor got up, dug into his pants, and left five dollars on the table and, doubled over in pain, shuffled out of the restaurant. Holding onto the side of the building, he went around the corner and vomited in the alley. His eyes watering, he wiped the excess puke and snot off his face with the back of his hand. He leaned heavily on his staff to catch his breath.

As the day wore on, John Taylor tried to think of his next course of action. It was becoming more and more difficult to

move with fluency. The chimera was beginning to break down, not to mention that he had three .22 caliber slugs lodged deep in his brain. He did not have the energy to walk further to the next town, that much he knew. He was able to drink coffee with sugar and cream and Pepsi—that gave him some energy.

As John Taylor walked slowly through Hertford, his legs were becoming more difficult to coordinate. *“John, you’re dying. Come and be with me, and together we can be John Taylor again.”* John Taylor ignored him, and instead he prayed, “Lord, strengthen me and heal me so that I can do good works to glorify your name and repair some of the damage that John did, Lord.” He sat down on a bench in a fragrant park and read his Bible. He located all the sections in the Bible that deal with health and healing and prayed for himself and for John’s soul. *“Where I am there are no Bibles, John. You’re reading make-believe. Come and be with me,”* John Taylor barely whispered. John Taylor ignored the petition. It was getting late in the afternoon, and John Taylor put the Bible back into his bag, got up, and with his staff started walking toward the town’s church.

The church was about twenty blocks away, but John Taylor pushed through the pain and made good time. The red brick church had a tall spire and a large wooden cross on the front of the building. The rectory was attached to the church. “John,” John Taylor addressed to the other John Taylor, “Yes?” the reply was a hoarse whisper. “John, I love you, I always have and I always will.” The other John replied,

*"I wish I hadn't done all those bad things, John. It tore us apart in the end. I love you too, I always have and always will."* The sun was low in the sky, painting everything with a vibrant palette, preparing with excitement to unite with the horizon once again. He walked up to the rectory door and tapped on it with his staff. John Taylor wiped the sweat out of his eyes with a handkerchief. He could hear an occupant coming to the door. As the sun continued to set, shadows of preposterous length cast their veil across the surface. The door opened, and an older man behind the door looked up at him. "Hello, can I help you?" The priest came out of the rectory and put an arm on John Taylor to steady him. "Are you OK? What's your name?" the priest asked. "I'm John Taylor, and I'm a travelling preacher." A black crow landed on the spire of the church and cawed. "Father," John Taylor asked, "can you pray for us?" John Taylor held his arms out from his sides, the sun casting John Taylor's spectacularly long shadow of a crucifix on the ground. He looked up to the heavens and slowly fell backwards. As he fell, the shadow rescinded, and when he hit the ground, John Taylor was dead.

There are those that would claim that the miracle or miscarriage of life that was John Taylor was too special to die at that time and at that place. There are existences that we don't understand, and with the world population of billions people, we will never know if John Taylor was incarnated in another life, in another place.

About seven miles south of Ridgewood, a travelling

preacher was walking south toward Hamersley, about twenty miles North of Perth, Australia. He was dressed in white, with white flowing hair, wearing a white trench coat, and carried with him a black staff with ornate carvings representing saints. He claimed it eased the pain of himself and others when he walked . . .





## Chapter 9

*I live in a self imposed asylum,*

*My hands and feet are bound.*

*I look out the window until my hands are numb,*

*I hear voices, I hear singing all around.*

*I'll never escape, I'll never be free,*

*My only companion is a rose wood tree*

## PeeWee

PeeWee looked out of his third story window in the North East corner of the Augusta Hospital for the Insane in the state of Virginia. PeeWee had been staring out of the corner window for as long as he could remember. The asylum itself was built in 1839 on seventy acres on the east side of the river. The beauty of the grounds was breathtaking, with well-kept flowering gardens around the institution with mature trees surrounding the structure such as black walnut, hemlock, cypress, black willow, and butternut trees. More varieties of trees could be found throughout the property. Inside, the asylum was modeled after so many others, with wings ninety to one hundred twenty feet long. The three wings were three stories high and divided into one hundred twenty six rooms—one hundred twenty of which were designated for patients, the remaining six for toilet and shower facilities.

PeeWee had never had a proper family upbringing. He was born to an unwed mother, a dancer, who loved PeeWee dearly but abandoned him for long periods of time. On one occasion, PeeWee was left in the apartment when he was no more than six years of age while his mother traveled to New York to dance in an engagement of *Westside Story*. PeeWee remembered his mother dressed in fur with a lovely pink fuzzy scarf and matching fuzzy earmuffs as she bent down and looked into his eyes saying, "I won't be back for two whole weeks, and you're a big boy now and can eat ice cream and watch TV and go to bed whenever you feel like it." His mother smelled good. PeeWee got mixed feelings from the incident: on the one hand, he got to play and have fun all day if he felt like it, but on the other hand, he didn't understand why his mother was going away and leaving him alone. She tucked a piece of paper in his hand and told him that if anything happened, he was to call his Grandma (whom he had never met), whose phone number was on the sheet of paper. "And remember, PeeWee, I love you and will see you soon, and when you see the moon at night, you will know I'm never far and I am looking at you. Now I have a train to catch," his mother said, kissed him on the forehead, left, and locked the door behind her.

PeeWee could still smell her scent by the door, and he liked it. It made him feel safe and secure. He thought about what he wanted to do next. He went into the refrigerator and took out a carton of milk. He got up on a chair, and from the top shelves in the apartment kitchen, he grabbed his

favorite cereal, Count Chocula. He went into a lower cupboard and got the largest bowl he could find—a four-quart mixing bowl. He poured almost the entire contents of the cereal into the bowl and half a carton of milk onto the cereal. He picked up the bowl, which was very heavy, and wobbled into the living room to watch cartoons. He spilled about half the contents of the cereal on the rug before he made it to the television.

PeeWee was quite happy watching cartoons and eating cereal, and after that he fell asleep. The television was still on, so the dialogue on the TV managed to entwine with dreams he was having. He dreamed that the apartment was bare with no TV, no refrigerator, no cupboards with food in them, and that there were bars on the door so he could not get out. This dream frightened PeeWee so much that he woke up screaming for his mother; then after a moment or two, he remembered she had gone away, and so PeeWee started to cry. When it got dark, he left the bedroom light on, climbed into his mother's bed, and went to sleep. He woke up several times during the night looking for his mother.

In the morning, with the sun streaming into the apartment, PeeWee felt better. He got up, went into the kitchen, and decided to make himself some toast. He had never made toast before, but he had watched his mother do it countless times and he figured he could handle it. He put two pieces of bread into the toaster, twisted and turned the knobs on the outside of the toaster, then finally found the lever that had to be pressed down to make toast. He had left

the TV on all night and heard the Flintstones playing, so he went into the living room to watch it. Meanwhile in the kitchen, PeeWee had changed the settings on the toaster to "extra dark," and the bread began to smoke in the toaster. As the toaster continued to burn the toast, the smoke rose up to the ceiling in a vertical column.

The smoke made it to the smoke detector, and it went off. PeeWee ran into the kitchen and saw the toaster smoking away. He put his fingers in his ears to try and stop the sound of the buzzer. Within minutes there was a knock at the door. His mother had told him not to answer the door to anyone, so he went into the bathroom and secreted himself inside the laundry hamper. The knocking at the door became a pounding, and finally a loud crash as the apartment manager broke down the door. Meanwhile, in the kitchen, the toaster had lit the toast on fire and toaster itself on fire. The fire spread to a roll of paper towels, then to some newspapers on the counter underneath the cabinets. The cabinets were then lit on fire. Smoke was thick in the apartment. PeeWee could hear the sirens of the fire engines coming, and still he remained secreted in the hamper. The fire was put out by firefighters using portable fire extinguishers. They did a sweep through the apartment to find out if anyone had been injured in the blaze. A firefighter checked the bathroom and the hamper and discovered PeeWee's hiding spot. The fireman lifted PeeWee out of the hamper asking, "Are you all right?" PeeWee nodded yes. When asked where his parents were,

PeeWee became silent and looked at his shoes. "I can get you the name of the occupant," the manager said. The manager went and found his mother's name, Georgette Granger—no work number, no further details.

The firefighters took PeeWee outside, and Child Protective Services were called in to assess the situation and to ensure that PeeWee was safe. When CPS arrived, a very nice lady with red hair talked to him about his parents. "Do you know where your parents are?" PeeWee looked down at his shoes. The CPS lady knelt down to his level and put her hand softly under his chin and looked into his eyes, "Do you know where your mother is?" PeeWee had no choice but to look into her eyes and he said, "New York." "Do you know when she is returning?" asked the lady, and PeeWee shook his head no. Since nobody knew exactly where his mother was, and no way of contacting her, PeeWee was taken into Child Protective Services. After a week in the care of CPS, PeeWee was able to give the lady bits and pieces of information, enough that Georgette Granger could be contacted. There was a brief phone call between CPS and PeeWee's mother, who was informed that she would probably face child endangerment charges. Ms. Granger cut the conversation short saying that she was going to finish the run of the show in New York, which had three days left, and return to Augusta and everything would be back to normal. PeeWee's mother even talked to PeeWee on the phone, telling him that she would be back in two sleeps. PeeWee was happy and excited. After fourteen days, she

never showed. PeeWee never heard from his mother again. Child Protective Services had no alternative but to place him with temporary foster parents. A warrant was issued for the arrest of Georgette Granger for child endangerment and failure to provide the necessities of life.

The lady with the red hair explained as best she could to PeeWee that he had to be part of a family, and that they were going to find him a nice family to be with. She said that he would first stay with a temporary family until a permanent one could be found. PeeWee was placed in temporary foster care in a home in an impoverished part of Augusta. CPS drove PeeWee to the foster parent's home at about 2:00 PM. The agent brought him to the door and rang the doorbell. PeeWee was terrified and scared. He didn't know what to expect. He missed his mother and wished that when the door opened, it would be his mother at the door to give him a hug and kiss him on the forehead. The door opened to a lady who was wearing a housecoat and had curlers in her hair and big yellow teeth. PeeWee had never seen anybody like this, and frightened, held onto the CPS lady's leg. She put her hand behind his head and told him it was OK, and she pushed him forward toward the door. The lady with the housecoat and curlers bent down and said, "My name is Mrs. McNab, and you must be PeeWee." Her breath smelled terrible, and he almost wretched. PeeWee looked at his feet and murmured, "Yes, ma'am." The CPS lady and Mrs. McNab pushed and prodded PeeWee into the house, and there was a lot of paperwork being done. The

house smelled funny, like dirty carpet and ravioli. PeeWee looked around—there were kids everywhere. On couches, under tables, in closets.

The foster parents, Walter and Agnes McNab, had four children of their own and four foster children. The four natural children were between five and twelve years old. The foster children were between four and nine years old. They all just stared at PeeWee making him even more uncomfortable. It was a small house for so many people—a bungalow of about 1,100 square feet with three bedrooms and one bathroom. After the CPS lady left, Mrs. McNab called all the children around and announced, “We have a new member of the family. His name is Peter, but he likes to be called PeeWee.” All the kids laughed at the name “PeeWee” and PeeWee turned red with embarrassment and could feel tears welling up in his eyes. Mrs. McNab introduced all the children one by one. One of the younger foster children asked if PeeWee would like to see his green tractor, and PeeWee followed him and looked at the tractor. When he went to touch it, he was told he was only allowed to look at it and not touch it. PeeWee did not know how to interact with other children, being an only child and never having gone to playschool or kindergarten; so he leaned up against a wall and slumped down sitting on the floor, arms wrapped around his knees. Two of the older kids came over and kicked him in the shins saying, “What kind of name is PeeWee? It must be a faggot name.” Tears came to PeeWee’s eyes from the kick to the shins. And he had no

idea what a faggot name was.

When Mr. McNab arrived home from work, dinner was served. The biological kids and parents sat at the dining room table, while the foster children had to sit on the kitchen floor and eat their meal. There was a difference in what the “family” ate and what the foster children ate. Mrs. McNab put their food into the blender—ham, potatoes, lima beans, whatever—and blended it into a slurry. Mrs. McNab said it was easier that way and “each child gets the same thing to eat.” Each child was given a bowl of the gruel and a spoon, and sometimes a piece of bread. The “family” drank milk and juice, while the foster kids got water. Mr. McNab never even acknowledged PeeWee, and in a sense, PeeWee was thankful for that. The foster kids were sent to bed at 7:30 PM, while the family played cards and board games. The biological children slept in two rooms with bunk beds, and the foster children had to sleep on cots in the basement of the house. The basement was a scary place for the children. The door to the basement had many scratches on it and a chain lock on the door. It opened to a steep creaky staircase and was very dark with only two lightbulbs to light the entire basement. The cots were lined up against a concrete wall, and the foster children each had one pillow and one blanket.

When 7:30 rolled around, the foster kids were sent to bed. They were ushered down the creaky stairs by Mrs. McNab, and the children took off their clothes and slept in their underwear. Mrs. McNab pulled out PeeWee’s cot; it had

cobwebs all over it. The cot was set up as the others against the wall, and PeeWee was forced to strip down to his underwear and get into the cot and go to sleep. Mrs. McNab went up the creaky stairs and shut the basement door. The basement lights were turned off. PeeWee could hear the chain lock engage on the basement door. The only light came from moonlight shining through two dirty opaque barred windows. The other foster kids chattered among themselves, and PeeWee could hear snippets: "I hope I don't see the ghost again tonight," "There is a monster that hides under the stairs." PeeWee was scared. The basement smelled of mildew and natural gas, and there were creepy creaky sounds coming from all over the basement. PeeWee bunched himself up in a fetal position and fell into an uneasy sleep.

When morning came, the chain lock on the basement door was taken off and Mrs. McNab called down to the children to come upstairs and eat breakfast. They weren't allowed to dress because it was easier for Mrs. McNab to clean them when they were stripped down to their underwear. The children dashed up the stairs as fast as they could. One little girl, Susan, came up last and was walking funny. "What's the matter, Suzie?" Mrs. McNab asked. Susan looked down and said nothing. "You pissed yourself, didn't you?" Mrs. McNab was very angry. "That means you have to wash your clothes and your blanket and clean the cot." All of the foster children had become stiff with terror. "All right, all of you, out of your underwear and sit down against the

kitchen wall.” The children did as they were told. In terror they watched Mrs. McNab grab the clothespin bag and put a clothespin on each child’s genitals. The children tried not to cry out. “Last time Suzie pissed herself, you got fifteen minutes. This time you get thirty.” The children sat on the kitchen floor in excruciating pain, trying to be brave and not cry. After thirty minutes were over, the clothespins were taken off and each child received a spanking. PeeWee couldn’t understand why such a thing was happening. He didn’t pee the bed—his mother had taught him about that when he was four.

Mr. McNab was a violent man with a drinking and gambling problem. He liked cards and whiskey. So did Mrs. McNab, and it was not unusual for the two of them to leave the house full of kids to go to the Indian casino. One evening after returning from gambling, Mr. McNab staggered into the kitchen looking for another drink. PeeWee was lined up with the others on the kitchen floor eating gruel from their bowls. PeeWee was leaning against the cupboard door that contained the liquor. Looking directly at PeeWee, he asked him if he was a boy or a girl. “A boy, sir,” was his reply. Mr. McNab grabbed PeeWee by the underwear, holding him off the ground, asking if he had been circumcised. PeeWee didn’t know what that meant, and so he said no. “Well, how ’bout we do it right now!” Mr. McNab sneered, opening a kitchen drawer and drunkenly grabbing a knife. PeeWee was terrified. “What are you going to do?” PeeWee shrieked. “I’m gunna cut your liggy off!” Mr. McNab sneered.

Mrs. McNab entered the kitchen hearing the commotion, and Mr. McNab threw PeeWee back onto the floor, into his bowl of mush, breaking the bowl, and spewing gruel everywhere. Mr. McNab slipped on the gruel and fell backwards, hitting his head on the doorway and knocking himself out cold.

Mrs. McNab turned to PeeWee with a wicked sneer, "You fucking little bastard!" PeeWee was frozen in terror and could not move. Mrs. McNab came at him with her large yellow teeth and pummeled him with the beating stick reserved for naughty children. The other children huddled together leaving PeeWee to take the full brunt of the attack. When Mrs. McNab was done, he had a bloody nose, broken blood vessels in his left eye, and deep bruises all over his body. His ear was bleeding also. The other foster kids were told to get to bed immediately or face the same punishment. They scurried down the stairs and into their cots, even though it was only 5:30 PM. Turning back toward PeeWee with a diabolical grin on her yellow teeth, she picked up PeeWee by his underwear and threw him down the basement stairs. When PeeWee landed at the bottom of the stairs, he had a terrible pain in his side and it hurt to breathe. He went to his cot and laid down in a fetal position. Minutes later, the other foster children were out of their cots and punching and kicking PeeWee more. Two of the older kids warned PeeWee not to get them into trouble again. PeeWee lay in his cot and did not move. Every breath was painful, and he had no tears left to cry, no dreams to dream, and no mother to hold him tight and kiss him on the

forehead.

PeeWee wasn't the only one singled out for senseless beatings. The foster children all felt the wrath of Mr. and Mrs. McNab. The days became monotonous as they were awakened early and assigned to housekeeping duties. The foster children had to complete all of the household tasks. This included vacuuming, scrubbing the areas of the home with hardwood or linoleum with soap and water, cleaning toilets pretty much by hand (with a cloth and bleach). The foster girls were responsible for all laundry duties, and the foster boys for ironing the clothes. Anything less than a perfect press could result in a beating with "the stick." The foster children washed and dried all the dishes, set the table for the family, and put the dishes away when they were cleaned. Suzie continued to have difficulty in holding her bladder through the night, which would result in the entire group of foster kids having their genitals pinned with clothespins.

There were hushed allegations of sexual acts being performed on the boys and the girls, not just by the McNabs but by their kids as well. PeeWee remembered being led out of the kitchen into Mr. McNab's study and being given a tumbler full of "medicine" to drink. It was hot and sour and he almost threw up drinking it. Mr. McNab also drank a tumbler of whiskey. He waited for about twenty minutes and then performed horrific acts on PeeWee that he did not remember. He only remembered waking up in his cot and aching all over. After abusing PeeWee, Mr. McNab took to

calling PeeWee “the little faggot,” and would sexually abuse him several times a month. Then all the other kids started calling him “faggot” too. PeeWee thought of his mother often and the fun they had had when it was just the two of them in the apartment. He shed a tear thinking about it. He was approaching eight years of age and was able to pick up on the meanings of bits and pieces of adult conversations. Occasionally he heard about a foster child that stayed with the McNab’s for a couple of months, then died suddenly of an “epileptic seizure.” The McNabs talked about the monthly stipend they got for the foster kids and tried to take on more. The Child Protection Services said they were over the limit as it was—the need was great, but they could have no more children.

PeeWee stayed with the McNabs for seven months. Then one day the lady with the red hair came to get him. She said she had good news, that they had found him a permanent foster home. PeeWee left the McNab house in the same underwear, socks, and clothes he was wearing when he was brought to the house. His appearance wasn’t far removed from a Dickensian waif. They got into the van and started driving. “How have you been, PeeWee?” asked the lady with the red hair. PeeWee turned his head slowly toward her and looked at her. He had bruises on his face, a red eye due to a strike that broke the capillaries in his eye, and a black eye that hadn’t healed. The lady with the red hair made several cellular phone calls. PeeWee overheard “McNabs” being talked about and “PeeWee” and “immediate admission” to

emergency to ensure he was OK.

He said nothing and turned his head slowly back to looking outside. PeeWee didn't trust adults anymore, he didn't trust anybody anymore. "First, we're going to take you to the doctor to make sure you're OK." PeeWee said nothing. They drove to the hospital, and the lady with the red hair took his hand and led him inside. After a short wait, the nurse called PeeWee to see the doctor. The lady with the red hair went with him. The doctor instructed PeeWee to take his clothes off down to his underwear. "You can wear this housecoat to keep warm," the doctor said of the hospital gown. PeeWee immediately bunched up in a corner holding his knees with his hands. "Come now, PeeWee, the doctor just wants to see if you're OK." She extended a hand to him and, without looking, he took it and got up, stripped to his underwear, and sat up on the examination table. PeeWee's underwear was dirty, with feces and urine caked into the fabric. The doctor exchanged a concerned glance with the CPS officer. The doctor examined PeeWee and found signs of extensive and systematic abuse of all kinds. Bruised shins, broken ribs, damage to his penis, a strained left arm, and bruises on his right arm and back. He also had head lice. The doctor ordered X-rays to be taken. PeeWee was scared but brave through the ordeal. He wished his mother was there. When the X-rays came back, there was evidence of continual abuse: some bones beginning to heal, others fresh, showing deep bone-bruise damage.

The doctor said he had to talk to the lady with the red

hair for a minute and left PeeWee alone in the examination room. The doctor explained to the CPS officer that PeeWee had been beaten regularly, systematically, possibly sexually, and was in poor health suffering from malnutrition. The CPS officer intended to follow up with the McNabs and ask some hard questions in the presence of police. They came back in and PeeWee was told he could get dressed. The doctor's recommendation was that PeeWee be monitored psychologically as physical trauma could manifest itself in a multitude of psychological abnormalities. They got back in the van and started driving to the new foster family's home.

The new foster family's home was much nicer. Again the lady with the red hair took him to the door, and a pleasant lady answered the door and bent down, "Hello, PeeWee, I'm Mrs. York. We're happy you can come and be with us." The lady with the red hair talked to Mrs. York for a long time, and Mrs. York kept shaking her head. After CPS left, Mrs. York introduced PeeWee to her two sons, Mike and Blaine. They were older than PeeWee at twelve and fourteen years old. PeeWee was scared of them. The first thing Mrs. York did was to get PeeWee to take a shower. It took a lot of patience but she was finally able to get PeeWee out of his clothes and into the shower, where she made the water nice and warm and washed his hair with lice shampoo and cleaned his entire body. In his old foster home, cold showers and red-hot showers were a means of punishment. She gathered PeeWee's clothes and put them into a bag and threw them into the garbage. She found some clothes that Mike had

grown out of and PeeWee got dressed. Mrs. York had to help PeeWee because he was shaking so much he couldn't do up buttons or a zipper. "Are you scared?" Mrs. York asked. Tears just welled up in his eyes. PeeWee was reminded of stripping down to go to bed at the McNabs. The clothes were big for him, so Mrs. York folded the sleeves up and turned the pant legs up. "Now go and look around, this is your new house now," Mrs. York said. PeeWee said nothing but went into the living room and sat on the floor between a couch and an easy chair, with his back against the wall, holding his knees with his hands.

Mrs. York was concerned, but knowing some of the history gleaned from his last foster home, she decided to let him be and let him come around in his own time. PeeWee listened to the sounds in the home. He could hear Mike and Blaine playing with what sounded like an electric train. Mrs. York was in the kitchen chopping something with a knife. The television was located in the room where PeeWee was. The television was in an entertainment center with many cupboards and drawers. PeeWee silently went to the entertainment center, and opening the bottom cabinet drawers, noticed they were empty. PeeWee concealed himself inside the entertainment unit and closed the doors. He felt safe. He liked the smell inside of the entertainment center.

When Mr. York arrived home from work, Mrs. York told him all about PeeWee's arrival and called for him several times. They called his name over and over, but PeeWee was

silent. Mrs. York was becoming concerned. They looked all over the house for him but could not find him. Mr. and Mrs. York were becoming frantic. They looked in the backyard, in the basement, and in the attic, but PeeWee was not discovered. Being in the dark reminded PeeWee of when he would wake up at night and climb into bed with his mother. He always slept well in the bed they shared. Mr. and Mrs. York were in the living room discussing the last known place she had seen him. PeeWee had gotten dust up his nose and was trying not to sneeze, but he couldn't hold off the sneeze and sneezed inside the entertainment center. Mrs. York opened the door to the entertainment center, and there was PeeWee. "We were worried sick about you, PeeWee. What are you doing hiding in a cabinet?" "It seemed like the safest thing to do," replied PeeWee. Mr. York helped him out of his hiding spot, and Mr. York shook PeeWee's hand saying he was pleased to meet him. He had an iron handgrip shaking PeeWee's hand.

Around 6:00 PM supper was served, and by force of habit, he went to the kitchen to await his bowl of food. Mrs. York took PeeWee's hand and led him to the dinner table where there was a place setting for him. He was horribly uncomfortable, and he felt he didn't belong. The meal served on this particular evening was meatloaf, mashed potatoes, peas and carrots, and dumplings. The family said grace before the meal, another custom not familiar to PeeWee. PeeWee didn't even know what God was. PeeWee had never in his life had a meal in a dining room table. His

mother and him always used to eat on a coffee table in the living room, watching TV. It was very hard for PeeWee, trying to imitate the family with the way they held their forks and ate.

Once supper was ended, Michael and Blaine invited him to see their railroad set. PeeWee was scared to say yes on account of his experiences in the McNab home. Mrs. York said it was OK if PeeWee left the table. He climbed down the chair and went in the living room between the chair and couch again. All he had eaten was two or three teaspoons of mashed potatoes. This worried her, the lack of food that PeeWee was eating, but she decided to give it a few more days and hoped the problem should work itself out. PeeWee stayed perfectly still while the family was watching television. Mr. and Mrs. York would ask PeeWee if he was enjoying the shows, PeeWee would only nod yes. PeeWee fell asleep between the couch and chair, and Mr. York carried him to his bed in the guest room. Mr. and Mrs. York spoke at length about the abuse that PeeWee had endured and tried to come up with parenting techniques that would promote healing, both physical and emotional. The couple also set up some counseling sessions with a child psychologist for further insight and to learn techniques which might work.

At 4:40 AM, he awoke in a partially conscious state of mind. PeeWee quietly went out to the kitchen, withdrew a large knife, and silently walked toward the sleeping Mr. and Mrs. York. He opened the door silently and stood at the foot

of the bed. He began to yell, "Faggot, I'm going to cut your liggy off, then what will you do?" The Yorks awoke instantly and took the knife from PeeWee. After they had talked to PeeWee for a little while, they thought the incident was a sleepwalking event, and Mrs. York tucked PeeWee back in his bed. When Mrs. York returned to bed, Mr. York said, "I hope we haven't gotten into something we can't make work or fix." The night passed without further incident.

PeeWee did not remember the incident from the night before. It was not brought up at the breakfast table. PeeWee still found it profoundly uncomfortable to sit at the table. He refused to make eye contact with anyone at the table. Mrs. York tried to coax PeeWee to eat. PeeWee refused to eat anything because his mother came back and was going to take them out for breakfast. PeeWee climbed down from the dining room chair and went to the living room window to watch for his mother. Mrs. York thought it best to let PeeWee stay by the window until he realized his mother was not coming. But PeeWee stood looking out the window all day long until it was dark. Mrs. York came over to PeeWee and gently told him that his mother was not coming. PeeWee looked at her and said, "But she will be here tomorrow, she promised me." Mrs. York smiled and took PeeWee's hand, asked him if he was hungry, and tucked him into bed.

PeeWee did not fall asleep. He was sure his mother had come back and didn't know where he was. PeeWee thought she must be in the apartment waiting for him. He swung his legs out and silently got out of bed, went to the kitchen

phone and dialed the phone number at the apartment. There was a funny voice that said the number was no longer in service. PeeWee thought this was OK because she must just be sleeping. He got back into his bed and made plans to find his mother. It was around 3:30 AM when PeeWee again swung his feet out of bed and silently made his way toward the back door, because it was less noisy. He had on new clothes that Mrs. York had bought for him including a light jacket and new running shoes. It was a warm summer night and PeeWee inhaled all of the beautiful smells—black fertile earth, the apple tree in the front yard, the distant smell of lawn clippings. He breathed in and felt energized. He looked around up at the sky and it was full of stars, and a half moon was shining brightly. PeeWee remembered his mother saying, “When you see the moon at night, you will know I’m never far and I am looking at you.” He kept looking up and saw the moon. He could hardly contain himself with excitement. He started to follow the moon to his mother, but the more he followed the moon the further away it seemed. He didn’t know what to look for; would there be a moon on the roof of his apartment? He continued walking toward the moon for a couple of miles. He came across a series of railroad tracks. This bolstered PeeWee, because the moon led him to a railway yard, and that his mother had left for New York on a train. He waited on the railway tracks for a few moments because he did not know what to do. He was now sure his mother was waiting for him at the railroad station in New York. There was a train slowly growling into the yard from the east, it’s massive three light engine cutting

daylight out of the darkness. The train stopped and PeeWee watched as it backed up slowly and a couple of railroad workers hooked up a string of boxcars to the train. The train must be going to New York! PeeWee thought. He found a boxcar with the door ajar and climbed inside the train.

When his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could see three or four men inside the boxcar. PeeWee wondered if he was in trouble, but the hobos posed no threat. But they did ask him questions: What's your name? Where you headed to? Have you got supplies? "No," replied PeeWee, "I have no supplies." "Then here," the hobos offered, "take some pop, bread, and hotdogs." As the train rumbled on, the hobos made a meal of deep fried beans, hot dogs, and bread. It was the best meal PeeWee ever had. After eating, PeeWee was sleepy and lay to rest on some burlap sacks. He fell fast asleep.

The train that PeeWee had climbed into was headed for Memphis, Tennessee. The rhythm and rocking motion kept PeeWee asleep, almost like singing a lullaby. When the train arrived in Memphis eleven hours later, his boxcar mates told him he had to get out of the train or he would be discovered. With that the hobos were gone, and the boxcar inspector inspected the boxcars until he got to PeeWee's, then climbed into the boxcar to see if he was OK. "I'm here to meet my mother," PeeWee said. The inspector lifted PeeWee out of the boxcar and to a stationhouse where he could call for help. Police and an ambulance arrived in no time. They were asking PeeWee all kinds of questions. One

of the officers sent PeeWee's picture out to law enforcement agencies, and within an hour there was a match with a little boy who disappeared last night from Virginia. They put PeeWee in a car and got ready to transport him back to Virginia.

When PeeWee arrived back at Augusta, Mr. and Mrs. York were there to greet him. They had been very worried at his whereabouts. Back at the York household, other incidents occurred. On one occasion, PeeWee had gone into the Yorks' bedroom with scissors and began to cut Mrs. York's hair. She awakened screaming—PeeWee had cut half her hair off. On another occasion, PeeWee got up in the middle of the night and lit the kitchen curtains on fire, so if his mother was walking by she would see the flames and smoke and come and rescue him. The fire got out of control quickly, and he did not know what to do, so he secreted himself inside the clothing hamper in the bathroom. The fire alarm went off and Mr. York woke up and sprung into action, dousing the flames with a fire extinguisher. The Yorks doubted they would be able to provide PeeWee with what he needed to get better, so they talked to Child Protective Services explaining PeeWee's bizarre behavior—not that he was bad, but misdirected. Child Protective Services agreed to take PeeWee and try to find another home for him. PeeWee thought they were taking him to see his mother.

PeeWee was almost ten years old as Child Protective Services pondered what to do with him next. He was very thin for his age, introverted, socially undeveloped, and

displaying psychotic behavior. He had been through lifetimes of misfortune at his age. He appeared to have psychoses developing and other mental conditions. CPS checked their files and could not find a suitable foster family willing to take him. The lady with the red hair sat down with PeeWee and asked him how he was doing. PeeWee looked at the floor and did not look up at her. "PeeWee, at nine years old, you're supposed to be a big boy going to school." The lack of schooling was no fault of PeeWee's, but blame lay with his foster families. Mrs. McNab could care less if PeeWee got an education. Mrs. York's excuse was that she was homeschooling him. In reality, both families were primarily motivated by the stipend they got for each foster child. "Look up at me, PeeWee," said the lady with the red hair. He looked up into her face, and his beautiful blue eyes held nothing but pain and surrender.

As PeeWee grew older, he was placed in temporary foster home to temporary foster home. Nearly all the foster parents took children in as a way to get a government stipend checks. In most of the foster homes PeeWee was placed in, he managed to stay four or five months before he would run away in search of his mother. As he grew older, his plans for locating his mother, and his perceived history of their relationship, had become more and more complicated. PeeWee was in the beginning stages of schizophrenia. The foster homes usually ended up witnessing bizaare and irrational behavior, and ultimately,

when PeeWee either couldn't take the abuse anymore or a plan for finding his mother was formed, he would run away in search of his mother. He always thought he knew where she would be waiting for him. The state was rapidly running out of options to deal with PeeWee, so it was decided that he would go to a juvenile detention center. Because he was twelve, and the difficulty in placing him, it was decided he should go to Augusta Regional Youth Detention Center as he met all the criteria: running away from homes, truancy, and display of disturbing patterns of behavior that required him to be observed for psychiatric abnormalities and intervention.

"We are going to try putting you into a group home," the lady with the red hair said one day to PeeWee. In reality, he was going to juvi (the youth detention center). "There will be lots of children there and you can make lots of friends. You can go to school there and play games like baseball and basketball. There are doctors and councilors there to make sure you are OK and always have someone to talk to. You won't be hurt like in the foster homes." The lady was self-conscious for lying and blushed, and PeeWee didn't believe a word she said. PeeWee was showered and given some clean clothes to wear, and the lady with the red hair started to drive PeeWee to the detention center.

When they arrived at the house, PeeWee was surprised at how big it was. The entire building was surrounded by a chainlink fence with razor wire on top. There were kids outside playing basketball and street hockey. The lady had

to stop the van and talk to a security guard to be to let into the complex. The door opened, and a man in a green uniform let them in. He looked very angry. The lady with the red hair gave the man some papers, and they talked for about fifteen minutes while PeeWee sat in the van. She motioned PeeWee out of the van. "This is Mr. Yates. He will make sure that you get settled in and get everything you need. I will try to check on you twice a month," the lady with the red hair said as she got into the van and drove away. Yates held out his hand, "PeeWee." and crushed it with a handshake.

The lady with the red hair left, and Yates filled PeeWee in on the rules of the institution. "First and foremost," said Yates, "this is a juvenile detention facility. Do not be mistaken, PeeWee, there are criminals here, and accused criminals and adolescents here for their own good because they habitually run away from home—a habit you seem to have picked up. You will be issued a uniform that you will wear every day, if you have to attend a medical or some other appointment off site, you will wear the uniform. You will wear the uniform every day that you are detained in this facility." Mr. Yates went on and on about the rules that were to be followed, and he used so many big words that PeeWee was unsure of what was being said and what he was supposed to do. "Do you understand the rules and regulations, PeeWee?" Yates asked. PeeWee looked at the ground at his beat up sneakers and said, "I'm here to find my mother, sir." "Your mother?" boomed Yates, "Well, good

luck. Follow the rules and regulations in this book and you will do well. Choose not to follow them and your time at Augusta Regional Youth Detention Center will not be pleasant. Go to that building and get your uniform and personal care items.” Yates said, pointing to a green building. “And one more thing, son, lose the name PeeWee.”

PeeWee went to the green building, and inside were a couple of other boys with no clothes on and were being fitted for their uniforms. The staff member coordinating the distribution of clothes and other goods called to PeeWee, “Next. Come on, son, what’s your name?” “PeeWee, sir.” and the man and the other boys laughed. “I’m here to find my mother.” PeeWee said. “Right,” said the man. PeeWee was outfitted with the detention center uniform. The smallest uniform they had was too big for PeeWee, and the detention officer pinned up the legs of his pants. Another man named Williams showed him to his room in a gray building. There was a bed, a locker, a small writing table, and a chair. PeeWee sat on the bed. It was relatively comfortable. “The doctors and nurses should be by later on to check in on you and categorize you.” “I’m here to find my mother.” PeeWee said. The man shook his head slowly and exited the room to let PeeWee acclimatize.

PeeWee had nothing to his name, but at the uniform room, they had given him socks, underwear, a bag with a comb in it, deodorant, a toothbrush and toothpaste, a razor for shaving, soap, and shaving cream. The only thing he really recognized was the comb. Within about thirty minutes,

a nurse knocked on his door to take his vital signs (much like the time he went to the hospital). Some of the deep bruises were still visible. The nurse's name was Vera. About an hour later, the facility psychiatrist came to talk to PeeWee. He brought a second chair in so they could both sit and talk. "I'm Dr. Chamberlain. I am a psychiatrist and have some questions to ask you. Is that OK?" PeeWee looked at the ground and said nothing. Chamberlain began, "I see here in your file your name is Peter but you like to be called PeeWee. Why do you like to be called PeeWee?"

PeeWee's cheeks became red and without looking up he said, "My mother calls me PeeWee and I'm going to find her."

"How are you going to find her?"

"She got lost on her way back from New York and is trying to find me. I am going to meet up with her."

"What grade are you in school?"

"I don't go to school, sir."

"What year is it, PeeWee?"

"I'm not sure . . . a bad year?"

"Why would you say that?"

"I've been hurt bad for the longest time."

"PeeWee, tomorrow we are going to take a test." said Dr.

Chamberlain.

PeeWee, looking down at his feet asked, “What kind of test?”

“A test that will tell us how you think.”

The doctor left the room, and PeeWee was left to wonder what kind of a test tells you how you think. Six or seven people came to see PeeWee in the afternoon—the education supervisor, a man named Wayne whom he was going to be doing therapy with, and another person with a calendar and schedule of events. PeeWee was beginning to feel closed in. He missed his mother, her smell, her long soft hair, and the hugs that made him feel so good. He was beginning to realize that he had to do everything they wanted him to, and that he had no time to search for his mother while he was in this place. He was escorted to a different building where everyone ate together. They called it the “mess hall.” The meal that particular night was pork chops, mixed vegetables, and potatoes. PeeWee only had a few spoonfuls of potatoes. PeeWee, eating so little out of terror living with foster families, had effectively stunted his growth. Amidst the detainees in the juvenile center, PeeWee was the smallest and scrawniest. Within a day everybody knew about PeeWee, and was targeted for bullying because of his name, his lack of communication skills, and the possibility he was a homosexual.

Dr. Chamberlain arranged for PeeWee to come to his office (which was on-site) and conduct a complete

psychological profile. PeeWee was asked many questions and asked to consider his reactions to many scenarios. During the course of the examination, Dr. Chamberlain asked PeeWee about his mother and father.

“Tell me about your mother and father, PeeWee.”

“I don’t have a father, but I’m going to be with my mother next week.”

“And how do you know you will be with her next week?”

“I talked to her on the phone, and we are going to meet in Skyline Park.”

“When did you contact her on the phone?”

“Four days ago.”

“Do you hear voices in your head telling you to do things?”

PeeWee replied, “When I hear voices, they tell me to find my mother. She loves me and is trying to find me too.”

“Do you have friends, PeeWee?”

“No, sir, not one.”

“Do you like boys more or girls?”

“Girls are more fun to play with,” PeeWee replied. “Dr. Chamberlain,” PeeWee asked, “What is a faggot?”

“It means a man who likes other men instead of girls.”

“Do they put their liggies in your bum?”

“Intercourse, yes.”

“Dr. Chamberlain,” PeeWee said, “I must be a faggot.”

Dr. Chamberlain’s eyebrows raised at this comment. “Why do you think you’re a faggot, PeeWee?”

“Because, Dr. Chamberlain, I had that done to me lots at foster homes.”

“I think we’ve talked long enough, PeeWee, but we will talk again in the future.”

Dr. Chamberlain diagnosed PeeWee as having preadolescent psychotic and schizophrenic episodes. He was highly predisposed to mental illness and already showing classical signs, but the abandonment by his mother and the continual abuse he endured at the hands of foster parents had, in the doctor’s opinion, caused irreparable damage. Untreated, the prognosis for PeeWee was not good. The doctor prescribed Thorazine to treat the condition. PeeWee’s educational evaluation was grim as well. After taking numerous tests, it was determined he had an educational equivalent of a second grader. Doctors conducting a physical examination documented the extensive pattern of abuse. He was malnourished and tiny for his age, falling into the bottom five percent of the height curve. He had untreated open wounds on his body from being whipped and beaten, and he was also suffering from gonorrhea.

PeeWee was attacked the second week he was there. PeeWee was collecting colorful rocks behind the mess hall when a group of three kids came upon him and beat him with a baseball bat, a length of chain, and a golf club. PeeWee did not cry out as usual, and when the boys were finished beating him, they urinated on his broken body. He suffered a broken arm, a fractured eye socket, and a quarter-sized burn on his cheek where one of the kids burned him with a cigarette. PeeWee could not move for the pain in his body. He lay in the same spot for hours until the sun set, and PeeWee was found missing at evening count. He was discovered by a correctional officer at about 7:00 PM. An ambulance was called, and PeeWee was taken to the Augusta Medical Center.

The next day, PeeWee woke up in the hospital. His eye socket had been repaired and the eye was covered over with bandages encircling his head. He had an IV drip in his arm. In the afternoon, the lady with the red hair came to visit him. "Hello, PeeWee, how are you feeling?" PeeWee did not reply. "I know it's hard," the lady said, "but I need to get some information about what happened yesterday." PeeWee turned his head away from her and did not utter a word. It was several weeks that PeeWee was in the hospital while his wounds healed, due to his poor initial health. As the weeks passed, PeeWee began to feel better than he could remember. The nursing staff were nice to him, although none of them had seen his mother come in to see him. As PeeWee healed in the hospital, his mind was

continually thinking of reuniting with his mother. After the sixth week of being in the hospital, the doctor came around and told PeeWee he was going to be going home the next day. PeeWee had no intention of returning to juvi. PeeWee took the pillowcases off two pillows and filled them with hospital gowns, towels, soap, and food from the patient refrigerator. Wearing hospital pants and gown, he put on his clothes; and taking his two pillowcases full of "survival gear," scanned the hallway, waited for it to be clear, and walked out of the hospital at 1:00 AM.

PeeWee had had enough. He had been abused and raped in foster homes and beat within inches of his life at the juvenile detention center. He no longer trusted anyone. PeeWee vanished into the night, slipping between buildings and back alleys, gardens and trees. One thing he was especially good at was becoming invisible to minimize the number of times he could be abused. This time no one was going to stop him from finding his mother. He found a place between two buildings in downtown Augusta that was a tight squeeze that only he could fit in. Occasionally he met other "street urchins." Being small for his age, he was able to communicate with them, often learning tips on where to get free meals, soup kitchens, etc. He learned the tact of living on the street and stayed in the Augusta area for a year and a half looking for his mother. He was asleep in his cozy nest between the two buildings. That night, PeeWee dreamed that he was being chased by a crowd of people carrying baseball bats, guns, bow and arrows, and other

weapons. It was harder and harder for PeeWee to keep ahead of the murderous crowd. There was a railroad crossing ahead, and the bright light of the train illuminated a woman on the track who was gesturing him to hurry up. PeeWee ran even faster and reached out to grasp the woman's hand. He looked into the eyes of his mother and the train hit her dead on, leaving PeeWee's hand empty.

PeeWee woke from the dream in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. He thought about what the dream could mean and decided he had to get to New York as soon as possible. With stealth, he made his way to the railroad yard. The yard smelled of diesel oil and creosote. He asked a couple of the destitute men what train was heading to New York. He had to ask half a dozen before finding one who knew what train was departing for New York. PeeWee picked a boxcar with an open door and climbed in. There were some oily tarps at one end of the boxcar, and PeeWee curled up in them and went to sleep.

About three hours later, he was awakened by the movement of the train, each car being pulled and resisting the change in momentum. The boxcar door was closed, but PeeWee's eyes were able to adjust to the dark. While he had been sleeping, a derelict had climbed into the same boxcar that PeeWee was in. He was filthy, and his body odor all but filled the boxcar. He had a dirty brown beard and was wearing overalls and a greasy cap. He shot PeeWee a sinister smile; half his teeth were missing and the remainder decaying. "How are you, young fella?" "OK," said

PeeWee. The train was underway now and was close to its top speed. "I've got someth'n to show you, boy." He advanced toward PeeWee with his pants at his knees and his penis erect. PeeWee was incensed, and he reached into one of his pillowcases. He withdrew an ice pick he had found in his travels. As the derelict approached, PeeWee stabbed him in the eye with the ice pick. Enraged, PeeWee continued to stab the man approximately forty times. He was dead, there was blood all over the inside of the boxcar. PeeWee crawled into a corner of the boxcar and held his knees with his hands.

As the train made it into New York, the boxcars were inspected. The railroad authority, checking the boxcar PeeWee was in, immediately locked it shut and called police. They didn't need to lock the door really—PeeWee was in a state of shock and did not move from the corner of the boxcar. PeeWee was covered in blood and the bloody ice pick was at his side. Police went in and dragged him out and arrested PeeWee, putting him in handcuffs. PeeWee was familiar with handcuffs as one of his foster families would handcuff him to the bed at night so he could not get food or water. Police brought him down to the station, and PeeWee was interviewed in a small, dull room. It became apparent that there was a handicap of sorts with PeeWee as he was in a catatonic state and could not speak. Police judged him to be around ten years old, but he was closer to 15. After several calls to child protective agencies in nearby states, they got a hold of CPS in Virginia. The lady with the red hair

came drove to New York to help determine what happened in the boxcar.

“Look at me, PeeWee,” she said. PeeWee kept looking at the floor. She put her hand softly under his chin and asked him what happened. PeeWee looked up at her with tears in his eyes, “He kept coming at me with a stiff liggy and I don’t want that anymore. No more . . . No more . . .” The detective butted in, “But you stabbed him fifty times at least. Why?” PeeWee would talk no further. PeeWee was charged with murder in the second degree, primarily due to the forty-four stab wounds that were found on the victim’s body indicating extreme violence. He was held in jail for several months before he went on trial. At his trial, the public defender entered a plea of not guilty by reason of insanity. The judge and jury agreed, and he was sent to the Augusta Hospital for the Insane for an indefinite amount of time.

PeeWee was driven to the hospital for the insane by two police officers. PeeWee was transported in handcuffs and leg irons. When they arrived at the hospital, the officers escorted him to the door, removed his restraints, and turned him over to the hospital officials. A complete accounting of all PeeWee’s possessions was taken and put into envelopes and put away. He was issued official ward clothing: white pants and shirt, and white slip-on running shoes.

The facility smelled of wax and excrement. As he was being escorted to his room, PeeWee surveyed the vast array

of individuals with frightening afflictions. He had never seen self-destructive behaviors, lunatic rantings, self mutilation, or OCD. And that was just what he saw on the way to his room. The hospital was divided into higher—and lower-functioning patients. The lower-functioning patients were confined to cages, and some were locked to their beds with leather belts and buckle restraints. What struck PeeWee as odd were the endless cycle of movements they performed over and over again. PeeWee was escorted to a room in the northeast corner of the third floor of the hospital. He could look out over Augusta through a barred window, watching the traffic, trains and birds. PeeWee felt very fortunate that he had a nice room, even though there were bars on the windows and his door was locked at night.

PeeWee had found a book on bird watching in the hospital library. The routine never changed in the hospital. Day after day, week after week, and year after year. Breakfast at 9:00 AM, followed by exercise at 11:00. Lunch was served at 12:00, and then there were daily group therapy sessions from 2:00 to 3:00. PeeWee didn't have much to offer the group sessions. He only told them what he did and sat through all subsequent sessions. The lack of participation or willingness to face his crime was translated as lack of progress on PeeWee's part, making it likely he would never leave the asylum. PeeWee didn't care, his mother would come for him any day now, and it was a modestly safe environment if you knew who to avoid, and he could watch over Augusta from his window. He memorized the patterns

and schedules of the trains as the years went by.

PeeWee was twenty-one years old. He did not grow much; five foot two and weighing perhaps one hundred pounds. He couldn't read well so he looked at comic books. He didn't participate in card games with the other residents due to his lack of mathematical knowledge. PeeWee checked the newspaper every day and cut out advertisements for dance companies, of which PeeWee figured his mother would be a member. He had to get special permission to use the scissors. On one particular day, PeeWee was cutting out ads for dance companies and he happened across a troupe who had toured Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Houston, Chicago, and New York. They were presently going to be performing "Give My Regards to Broadway" in Augusta. PeeWee was very excited as he was sure his mother was in that dance troop.

He wrote the times on his calendar. The engagement began in two weeks and ran for three. PeeWee was not going to miss finally finding his mother. He thought as there was no toilet in his room, he could ring to be let out to go to the washroom; and perhaps hiding in a laundry bin he could make it out of the insanity hospital. PeeWee planned to escape a couple of days before the dance troop opened for their first show. He had a map of the city, and with a little help he was able to locate the performance theater on a map. It was about seven miles from the hospital. He memorized the location of the performance venue on the map until he didn't need the map anymore. He planned to

travel at night, and he stole a black trench coat from one of the nurses when she was not looking. He also stole a loaf of bread, stuffing the pieces of bread into the trench coat pockets, and two bottles of water.

Putting his plan into action, PeeWee waited until about 1:00 AM then rang the bell indicating he needed to use the washroom. The guards hired at night were often contractors and did not feel the same importance in ensuring all the safety and security protocols were enforced. They let PeeWee out of the room with barely a second thought. PeeWee went into the washroom, and when he came out the night watchmen were attending to another patient that was causing a disturbance and trying to cut himself. PeeWee crept along the corridors until he was at the front doors of the institution. A red button opened the front doors, and the security personnel at the desk had gone to assist with the cutting incident.

PeeWee pressed the red button and slipped outside and breathed in the beautiful nighttime essence of flowers, pine trees, beetles, and dew. PeeWee began to make his way to the venue. He travelled at night, along dimly lit walkways. The first night he travelled about four miles. He found a heavily bushed part of the landscape, ate some bread, and slept there during the day. The second night's hike brought him to a natural area that overlooked the Staunton Performing Arts Center. The engagement was to begin the next day. PeeWee stayed in the natural area and slept under several large shrubs. He was so excited, but also exhausted,

and sleep overcame him.

When he woke up, it was about 4:00 PM. People came and went to the arts center. There was a large tour bus already parked there, and he figured that is what the dance troupe travelled in. He tried to eat a piece of bread, but his hands were shaking badly and he vomited up the bread; he was in such a heightened state of excitement. As it was late August, it got darker sooner, and the performance was set to begin at 7:30 PM. PeeWee checked his watch—4:48. In all of the excitement and in spite of his best planning, PeeWee had no idea how he would find his mother. Should he try to sneak into the performance? Should he wait until the dance troupe loaded up into the bus after the show? Should he wait by the doors hoping that she would use those doors and none other?

PeeWee decided to sneak into the show that evening but was turned away. This frightened PeeWee and he went back to the meadow. The next day, he had an idea. He took off the trench coat and headed down to the venue. It was about 5:00 PM, so PeeWee walked down to the back of the building and saw an open door. He climbed the stairs to the door and entered. He had entered a backstage entrance. The workers took PeeWee to be part of the show staff. He looked all around but could not see his mother. He watched the performance from backstage but he did not see his mother.

PeeWee waited outside until people started going to the bus and automobiles. All of a sudden, PeeWee caught sight

of a lady dressed in fur with a long scarf on and long auburn hair. He ran over to her and gave her a huge hug and told her how much he missed her. When the lady pulled back, she asked him who he was. "It's me, PeeWee, don't you remember me?"

"I'm Laura Franks, I am the artistic director of the show. Who do you think I am?"

Tears welled up in PeeWee's eyes. "I thought you were my mother."

"What is your mother's name?"

"Ms. Granger, Georgette Granger," PeeWee replied.

"Georgette Granger," Franks repeated. "I used to dance with her years ago. She even danced for a couple of years in my troupe. We try to keep in touch."

"Where did she go?" asked PeeWee.

"She's very sick with bone cancer in the hospital."

Laura Franks could see the pain in PeeWee's face. "She talked about you a lot. She said she really loved you. Tell you what, I can drive you to the hospital to see her."

"Thanks so much, Mrs. Franks, I can't tell you how much this means to me."

They drove in silence to the hospital. It was about 10:00 PM. Visiting hours were over, but PeeWee was allowed to

see his mother on account of her being so ill. When PeeWee entered the room, there was the familiar smell, and he broke down crying. He knelt down at his mother's side and whispered in her ear, "Mum, it's me, PeeWee." He shook her shoulder and she opened her eyes and looked at PeeWee. "It's me, PeeWee." His mother held out her arms, and they hugged for what seemed an eternity. "I'm very ill, PeeWee, and I don't have long to live. I'm in a lot of pain." "I know, Mum, I can see it in your face." They talked for several hours. PeeWee crawled into the bed with his mother. He could feel her bony skeleton. He held her tightly and whispered in her ear, "Mum, let's start a new life, lets go and live in New York together, and never be apart." She clenched her eyes shut tightly, but the tears ran liberally down her cheeks. She nodded her head in agreement and whispered, "I've always loved you PeeWee." They fell asleep around five in the morning, holding each other tightly in bittersweet reunion. Before she dropped off to sleep, she whispered, "I can dance for you, PeeWee. Did you see me dance for you?" "Yes," said PeeWee, "you were beautiful."

As morning broke, PeeWee helped her out of the hospital bed and helped her get dressed in clothes. PeeWee found a wheelchair and put her in it. He wheeled her out the front door of the hospital fifteen blocks down from the hospital to where the railroad tracks ran. The train was on time and blowing its horn in the distance. Three massive locomotives were pulling at least one hundred box cars of heavy freight. PeeWee helped his mother out of the

wheelchair, and she held PeeWee's hand. Her whole skeleton ached. As the locomotive grew closer, it grew louder and more ominous. She held onto PeeWee. The rail tracks under their feet were ringing and screaming as the train got closer. PeeWee and his mother stepped in the middle of the tracks. His mother whispered, "I've been looking for you forever." "Me too," said PeeWee. They held each other tightly looking into each other's eyes, the train blowing its horn continuously. The rails were screaming and the train applied full brakes. The train was about 100 yards away from them now, and bearing down on them quickly. PeeWee and his mother stood in between the screaming railway tracks holding each other tightly, tears streaming from their eyes, rocking back and forth slightly, in an embrace of pure love. Time stood still, and for the first time in his life, PeeWee knew peace. Within moments the momentum of hundreds of thousands of pounds hit them dead on and the train screamed by in a howl of obliteration, erasing all the pain, all the agony and all the mistakes and misfortunes of two misguided and unfortunate lives. The pain was gone, and the world experienced a modicum of peace. And no tears were shed. PeeWee and his mother loved one another, but life had dealt them a hand with which they could build nothing upon. PeeWee and his mother died together in ecstasy.



## Chapter 10

*Sadness fills my heart and soul,  
Nothing can escape the evil black hole.  
Laying on my back, I cannot rise,  
Death quick and certain is my Demise.*

### Anatomy of A Killer

Alleyah, Rasha, and Taibah walked slowly down the sidewalk toward their destination: the Hotel Ishtar in Baghdad. A small girl, Abal, about four years old, was holding her mother Alleyah's hand. Alleyah was the leader of this mission. Rasha and Taibah walked on either side of Alleyah. They were wearing full black traditional Muslim attire, an abaya<sup>8</sup>, which covers from head to heel, opened from front but closed with buttons or snaps and worn over regular clothes. (the Arabic word literally means curtain or cover and covered their entire bodies). That afternoon, there were to be continued talks being held by the leaders of Iraq and Iran and members of NATO. The "mini summit" was scheduled to run for five days and struggled to draft resolutions that would lay out steps to bring peace to the war-torn region. Everything from the proliferation of al-Qaeda in countries like Iraq, to securing nuclear waste from falling into the wrong hands and its manufacture into nuclear weaponry that would further threaten to upset any delicate balance for peace that was hoping to be achieved,

was tabled.

Alleyah was wearing twenty-five pounds of C4 under her loose-fitting abaya. It was strapped to her raw skin with duct tape then secured in place with the wrapping of muslin cloth around the explosive. It was most uncomfortable for Alleyah, and she itched and perspired as she walked down the hot sidewalk. The C4 jiggled as she walked, and she had to remember to walk slowly so as to arrive at their destination on time and not to arouse suspicion. Even at four years old, her daughter Abal felt something was different, and she was sad and silent and had to be tugged in order to continue to follow her mother. Rasha and Taibah also carried explosives strapped around their midsection. They were faring about as well as Alleyah.

The hot sun beat down on them, and the black attire absorbed the wicked heat. Alleyah felt lucky for the full cover abayas they wore that concealed the sweat running down their faces, necks, and bodies. Was it luck that she felt? She was conflicted; it was both a distraction and an incentive to keep moving. The three women were carrying a total of about seventy five pounds of C4 wrapped around their waists and concealed by their abayas. Rasha and Taibah carried wicker shopping baskets as it was common to shop the streets for food, clothing, and other items. There was nothing that separated these women on this day from any other women or peaceful community members that day. They walked past others wearing the abaya and with children in tow. They were about four blocks from their

destination, slowly walking and talking in hushed tones as they walked. Alleyah checked her watch and slowed down to arrive at the hotel at the agreed time.

Alleyah's husband was an up-and-coming soldier of al-Qaeda in Iraq. As an obedient and disciplined wife, Alleyah had recruited Rasha and Taibah, convincing them to join the al-Qaeda organization in Iraq only a few months ago. Alleyah and her husband Riyasat had been married for about nine years and had three children, aged three, five, and seven. It was her husband that had become intrigued with al-Qaeda at about forty-three years of age and well into his marriage. His innate curiosity played a part in drawing him into the movement. Riyasat had been a leather worker, a tedious and poor-paying job, and would hear talk in the dark and dirty shop from young nephews of fellow leather workers about the evils that the west continued to perpetrate against the east. It seemed that every such worker and most of the people Riyasat knew had lost some member of the family or otherwise had their lives altered by the American presence in Iraq. Riyasat had lost a favorite uncle in one of the early American sorties that had indiscriminately bombed Iraq into submission as a clumsy response to 9/11.

When talk of al-Qaeda took place, Riyasat would nod his head in disapproval to such talk largely due to his ignorance of the al-Qaeda organization. One such youth invited Riyasat to tag along with him and his uncle to an al-Qaeda meeting to see what it was all about before he formed an opinion

about the organization. Agreeing to go to this meeting, they entered the back of a dwelling in a seedy area of the city after travelling through a maze of back alleys and shortcuts, through clothing and food shops, and entering a concealed room through a beaded curtain. Someone with education, experience, and charisma was talking about al-Qaeda. How al-Qaeda glorifies Iraq and Allah. How al-Qaeda was rapidly dissolving US military resolution, and how her members would be forever glorified. Riyasat felt adrenaline begin to pulse through his body, and he found himself immersed in the emotional invocation that throbbed in the room. The speaker drew attention to the gluttony of the west and the fact that the war had only been started to mask the US thirst for oil and the eradication of Islam.

“We should not, brothers, rely upon the *Christian* soldiers to try to ‘bring peace,’” he sneered. “There can never be peace in Iraq as long as western infidels roamed the streets unchecked.” At that, the speaker spat khat onto the dirt floor, and the room exploded with the excited uproar of his audience. “My daughter,” he began, then his voice cracked, “was taken and raped by the very people that are here to ‘free us.’ She was only nine years old.” Tears ran down his cheeks and into his beard. There was loud shouting in the room as the audience resonated to the man’s story.

“We should rely on Allah himself and *our* ingenuity to tell the US—no, to *tell the world* that we are here. We are not dead, and this is *our* country!” With that the room erupted in cheers and fists being shaken in the air.

After the meeting was over, Riyasat made his way back home in the dark. He was still pulsating from the meeting and chanting some of the key things he had heard that evening. As he neared his residence, he lamented that he had no car, a tiny apartment, too many children to feed, and his plain wife to sleep with. As he entered his apartment, everyone was asleep. His disappointment with his lot in life caused him to become angry and he raped his wife. Riyasat continued to attend al-Qaeda meetings as they came up. He had considered joining several times. His wages as a leather worker were meager, and they would not be able to feed another child, and Alleyah was pregnant again. He pondered that what al-Qaeda offered was the promise of something different, something *important*. Riyasat at forty-three did not have many options left. He was already considered old in his country, and he lacked skills that would enable him do anything more than different kinds of manual labor. In Baghdad, manual labor was plentiful, but it was mostly hard labor that a younger man's frame was suited to. Al-Qaeda ignited something that had long been absent in his life—ambition.

The group that Riyasat began to spend time with celebrated al-Qaeda achievements in routine attacks on civilian and military targets in various countries, and the great, almost miraculous accomplishment of 9/11. In continuing to press ahead with the cause, al-Qaeda ideologues encapsulated a complete break from the foreign influences in Muslim countries and the creation of a new

Islamic caliphate. Riyasat had been born to a family of five daughters and seven boys. He had not received any close emotional contact from his mother or father, and he showed none to his children or wife Alleyah. But al-Qaeda filled him physically and spiritually, and he bought into all tenants of the movement without question. His beliefs included that a Christian-Jewish alliance was conspiring to destroy Islam, which was largely embodied in the US-Israel alliance, and that the killing of bystanders and civilians would be religiously justified in Jihad. So diligent was he in attendance and provision of accounts of local malicious talk that he was given a stipend on which to try to survive for performing jobs for al-Qaeda that included information gathering, physical labor, and transfer of data from cell to cell. Riyasat was becoming a trusted part of the al-Qaeda organization and was privy to some actual plans of al-Qaeda missions.

At one such meeting, under especially secretive conditions, it was described that a large group of diplomats and ambassadors would be meeting in Baghdad in several months' time. The meeting lasted for about two hours, where it was generally agreed that this upcoming gathering of dignitaries would offer a rare and excellent opportunity to strike back at the west. Excitedly, the room discussed the most effective way to complete a mission like this would be to use some innocent-looking women, load them up with explosives, have them walk into the meeting room, and blow themselves up , killing many attending diplomats.

Alleyah loved her children dearly. They were the focus of her life. On Riyasat's late arrival home, he talked excitedly with Alleyah about the items that were discussed that evening. Alleyah had grown tired of Riyasat's ramblings about al-Qaeda. This night, however, he brought up the nature of a well-planned strike in the future.

"Think about it, Alleyah. If you were to perform a glorious sacrifice for Allah, the children would benefit from it," Riyasat said. Alleyah's blood went cold.

"Think about it, Riyasat. You know nothing about your own children, nothing at all, yet you are able to sacrifice me, leaving your children without a mother?" Alleyah asked.

Riyasat was quiet for the rest of the evening.

As the weeks went by, al-Qaeda was able to identify the target hotel (The Hotel Ishtar) and identify the probable venue that would be hosting a meeting including representatives from all over the world. The only problem was that it would need more than one individual to deliver enough explosive force to make a loud and clear statement to the world and kill a maximum number of people. As al-Qaeda continued to meet in different houses, a plan was arrived upon that the upcoming diplomatic talks could be significantly impacted (high probability of the death of twelve or more people, possible western dignitaries and ministers). It was decided that about seventy five pounds of C4 explosive would achieve the target death numbers and world reaction and bring glory to the cause. To Riyasat, it

was a perfect plan.

Due to Alleyah's love for her children, she did not want to perform the duty that Allah had "gifted" her in bombing the dignitaries at the Ishtar. She loved her children so dearly, and the love of Allah did not supersede that love that she felt. How could Allah justify taking away the mother of her three beautiful children? Alleyah and Riyasat had two boys and a girl. What did Riyasat know about raising a girl, especially a Muslim girl? Why was it she who had to lead this mission? Surely there were other more senior and passionate members who could carry out the task better than she. It had become a cause for a bitter divide in the way it was interpreted. Alleyah, not allowed to disagree with her husband on religious grounds, had to very artfully construct a conversation that included others who might carry out the terrorist attack better.

As al-Qaeda continued to gather intelligence from the hotel and other sources, they learned that the number of people who would be congregated was about eighty-one and in what meeting rooms they were likely to meet in. Al-Qaeda had three people "on the inside" at the hotel: a hotel porter, a maintenance man, and a front desk operator. They continued to feed intelligence back to al-Qaeda regularly. The intelligence gathered was of high quality, and the probability of a successfully planned terrorist attack was good.

As the plan began to take shape, the plan was to use

three or four women in full abaya to be fitted with twenty five pounds each of C4 fitted to their midsections. It was decided that a child should accompany the women so as to minimize suspicion and attention that the women might draw. The women and child were to be driven within twenty blocks of the hotel, where they would get out of the vehicle and casually walk into the hotel. Once they were in the hotel, they would walk into the ballroom in which the meeting was taking place and the C4 would be remotely detonated. As the plan continued to evolve, the maintenance man at the hotel provided detailed maps of where the meetings were to be taking place. The al-Qaeda operatives at the hotel were expected to facilitate the plan by letting the women into the hotel through a backdoor and passing on the correct information as to where the dignitaries were meeting. Due to the expected heavy security at the hotel, they would then enter the meeting venue through a small door in the kitchen in the back of the hotel property that was meant to throw grease and carcasses out of. It was not expected that the door would be protected by a military presence. If it was, one of the al-Qaeda members was expected to kill them with a silencer-equipped gun. Once inside, the women would walk to the meeting room pushing a tray of refreshments to both detract attention to themselves and to get as close as possible to the targets before detonating their payloads. The child was to hide in the kitchen or be dispatched before entering the hotel. The seventy five pounds of C4 was expected to be more than enough to kill the entire roomful of people.

Several more meetings identified Alleyah as the mission lead. Rasha and Taibah, who were younger than Alleyah, were intended to accompany Alleyah for this mission. Both Rasha and Taibah were married, and their husbands felt initial concern about the role that their wives had been identified to play by al-Qaeda. After all, the husbands and children of the scheme stood to lose their spouse and mother due to the suicide mission that was being developed. At the same time, they were told that the mission would glorify Allah and reward the sacrifice the men made of their spouses. After several more meetings, the plan was given starting-time parameters.

In the face of a collection of illogical and seemingly unrelated causes and purposes, the women found themselves walking toward the Hotel Ishtar under a blazingly hot sun, child in tow, and seventy five pounds (collectively) of C4 strapped to their midsections.

The three women stuck together to avoid detection; each had been loaded up with twenty five pounds of high explosives attached to their midsections. All they had to do was to continue walking to the Hotel Ishtar. They were now only seven blocks away. Alleyah's mind was totally with her children. She prayed to Allah for both forgiveness and thankfulness for the deed that she was to perform. Rasha prayed that her husband marry a fine woman and bear the children she would not be able to. Taibah prayed that she complete this mission as it was planned and prepared to meet her maker. They were now closing in on the Hotel

Ishtar. They were now five and a half blocks away from the venue. Alleyah looked into the eyes of her companions and intended to ask if they were ready to perform the imminent deed. The only thing she saw was the terror in their eyes through their abayas.

Alleyah's mind continued to be with her children. She smiled as she recalled hugging her two boys earlier in the morning. They continued their slow walk to the Hotel Ishtar. As they got closer, the military presence began to become visible. The roads were closed to vehicular traffic, but pedestrian traffic was being ushered along. Military people along the path continued to wave people through. Alleyah and her companions got closer and closer to the hotel. As they got within three blocks of the hotel, they were diverted around the building. The hours of planning and familiarizing themselves with the area weeks in advance enabled them to continue on toward the hotel once they were diverted around it. They slipped through back alleys and stores until they were within a quarter of a block of the venue. Alleyah pressed a bill into her daughter's hand and told her to go and buy a treat. The entrance to the hotel was heavily guarded, so they walked beyond the hotel and turned right into an alley.

They arrived at the half backdoor of the hotel and tapped twice. There were two dead soldiers who had been shot and dragged and hidden behind a dumpster. The door was opened by the maintenance man, and he beckoned them enter the hotel kitchen. The C4 felt like it weighed four times

its weight. Alleyah thought about what would happen if she ignored her instructions and did not go into the hotel. Would Allah really condone the murder that the three were about to unleash? Could she unstrap the explosives from her body and go back to her apartment and hug her three children? The thought made her feel good inside and she felt the C4 strapped to her, feeling where the cloth had been fastened. The maintenance man again sharply beckoned her to enter the hotel. Alleyah found herself moving in slow motion through the doorway. Rasha and Taibah waited for Alleyah, picking up on her hesitation. It was 11:45.

Once inside, the three put each other's arms on one other, hugging each other. Emotions were high. They had made it to the venue on time, but their lives were about to be sacrificed. The plan was to get the three women to deliver lunch to the dignitaries at exactly 12:15. Exactly one minute *before* entering the meeting room, Alleyah was to call a number on her cell phone. That was the signal for the person (an al-Qaeda operative) that received the call to wait the one minute while the women were serving lunch inside the meeting room then call a cell phone number that would detonate the C4 explosives attached to the women, and kill the dignitaries, and blow up a considerable portion of the hotel. Alleyah felt sick and vomited in a kitchen garbage can. She hoped her daughter would find her way back home safely. Her mind was flashing pictures and sounds in the kitchen were detached. The maintenance man was shouting instructions to her, and reality returned with sounds roaring

and a feeling of vertigo in the kitchen. She felt sick again.

The maintenance man had provided each of the three women the official hotel abaya and waited by the kitchen bathroom as they changed. Their abayas were soaked with perspiration. Again Alleyah pondered what would happen if she unstrapped the explosives from her body while changing. The maintenance man tapping on the door snapped her back into reality and she refocused, donning the hotel abaya. It was 11:58. The maintenance man ensured that the C4 was still attached firmly in place. He instructed Alleyah to lift the uniform while he applied more tape and rewound the muslin cloth. Alleyah felt defiled that another man was touching her. He did the same to Rasha and Taibah. Once the C4 was fastened, they made sure that the explosive was not visible through the hotel abayas. It was 12:08.

In the kitchen, three fancy silver hotel serving trays were waiting for them. They contained refreshments—sandwiches, fruits, vegetables and dip, and a selection of drinks. Each woman got behind a cart and prepared to enter the meeting room. The maintenance man instructed them to follow him to the meeting room. It was 12:10. The carpet was lush and thick, and the carts were silent as they pushed them down a long curved hallway toward the meeting room. The maintenance man indicated the meeting room was on the left hand side about twenty feet ahead. Alleyah could see the entrance to the meeting room ahead and two military figures at the doors.

Two heavily armed soldiers were guarding the entry to the meeting room. Alleyah indicated that the refreshments that were ordered were to be delivered by herself and her two helpers. Her heart was beating so fast that each beat resonated a deafening roar inside her head. She felt ill, but the abaya she wore concealed the terror on her face. Her comrades were faring about as well. Taibah was close to passing out. It was 12:13.

The soldiers examined the carts, and seeing nothing suspicious, stood aside holding the door open so that Alleyah and the others could enter the meeting room. Alleyah looked around. The dignitaries were sitting around an oval, solid wood table at least thirty feet long. They looked at her and the other two women briefly and continued on with their conversation. Alleyah looked at the meeting members and was struck by the fact that none of them looked evil, greedy, or depraved. Was she doing the right thing? Did Allah really intend for her to blow herself up and murder peace-seeking dignitaries? She and the other two women pushed their carts close to the massive table and began to distribute refreshment platters along the giant table. As she was setting down her third platter, Alleyah realized with a blast of nausea that she had forgotten to place the call on the cell phone prior to entering the meeting room. She looked at a clock on the wall. It was 12:22. Her mind raced. She could not make the call now in the presence of the dignitaries. There was nothing she could do. Rasha and Taibah looked to Alleyah for guidance as she

distributed the food platters. She could see the terror in their eyes. Finally, Alleyah finished distributing her cart. It was 12:24. She wheeled the empty cart out of the room with Rasha and Taibah right behind her. The guards held the door open for them, but then stood in front of it again. The maintenance man was nowhere to be seen.

Alleyah began to walk back towards the kitchen, pushing her cart. When the women entered the kitchen, the maintenance man was there and was astounded. Alleyah explained that she had forgotten to phone the number on her cell phone that was the signal to detonate the explosives. Infuriated, the maintenance man called the other two operatives in the hotel to come to the kitchen to try and find a way to salvage the plan. They arrived in seconds.

Meanwhile, Riyasat waited in the apartment for the phone call that would signal the time to detonate the explosives. When the phone did ring, it indicated a number other than the cell phone Alleyah was to call on. He answered the phone. It was the maintenance man at the hotel informing Riyasat of the imminent failure of the mission, and his wife being the primary cause of the failure. He hung up the phone and was incensed. The admiration of his peers would turn to vehement disgust. The rewards Allah would bestow upon him would not materialize. He would have to return to the dank leather working shop or worse and forfeit all his dreams of grandeur.

In a rage, he picked up the phone and slowly and deliberately dialed the number that would detonate the C4 strapped to his wife and two companions. He listened as the connection was slowly made. Eventually he heard the phone ring. In the hotel, the C4 detonated in with a shockwave that destroyed his wife and mother of his children, her two companions, the entire kitchen and blew out the back wall of the hotel. The three al-Qaeda operatives were also killed along with twenty-eight kitchen and hotel workers. The dignitaries at the peace meeting were unharmed. Riyasat smiled to himself. He had proven that he had the anatomy of a killer



## Chapter 11

*Life extinguished relights*

*And again faces its tormentors*

*Look up above, a life's black kite*

*Someone's in trouble, their life I lament*

## Generations

Here I sit, squandering in the corner of a dingy box of my own extinction. My life, fruitless like a magnificent tree dismantled by the cold wisps' of a devastating winter. I am without reason to live there is no maxim, no exegesis that could explain my desire to die. Unless of course my father would let me pursue my dream, to act, it is all that I have to live for! However it is but a fantasy a sort of hallucination. I feel as though I am Sisyphus destined to have my dream fulfilled and just as I accomplish a feat or a sort of performance, my father tears my train of destiny off the track and forces me to start over again. Why can he not understand that I have no desire to be a doctor, that's his dream, not mine! I have my own dreams, desires and wishes. I will not stand for this nightmare that infringes on my own reality. Nevertheless, I cannot just tell my father off. I cannot tell him that I am an independent person, he would never understand. I suppose that is why I sit here left with nothing but thought. Despite my situation I can't help but wonder, what would happen if I did kill myself? Would

anyone care? Then I wondered, what would happen if I do follow my father's orders and do become a doctor, would I look back on my life and regret the decision forever? Or would it be the opposite, could becoming an actor be the worst decision of my life? So, here I sit haunted with all my thoughts. I ponder on one more thing. Would it affect my friends and family and would my father care? I don't know what more I must say or do anymore. I know what I must do.  
\*bang\*



Red in the morning, sailors take warning. Forecast is for  
sorrow and pain and continued fall of grey shrunken  
bodies from the sky minus their souls.

Official Internet Site:

[www.TheSuicideDiaries.com](http://www.TheSuicideDiaries.com)



## Glossary of Terms

1. Contriturating: To pulverize.
2. Amatullah: Arabic name for Female servant of Allah.
3. Jannah: The Islamic conception of paradise.
4. Fadwa: Name derived from self-sacrifice.
5. Najair: Little Star.
6. Jilbab: Refers to any long and loose-fit coat or garment worn by some Muslim women.
7. Hijab: The headscarf worn by Muslim women, sometimes including a veil that covers the face except for the eyes.
8. Abaya: A loose, usually black robe worn by Muslim women, especially in Arabic-speaking regions, covering the body from head to toe and often worn with a headscarf and veil.
9. Moore's law describes a long-term trend in the history of computing hardware, in which the number of transistors that can be placed on an integrated circuit doubles approximately every two years.