

THE CHRONICLES OF A LOST SOUL

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To Linda Keeler, for teaching me how to write
To Harold Givens, for teaching me how to think

In The Fullness of Time

Standing in my high-rise flat, gazing out the window at the busy city below, my thoughts turn to the brother I killed.

I have been a traveler through time, a savior of the time line that courses through the whole of human history. I have been to the past, saving it from those who traveled from the future to change its course. I have been to the future, to protect it from those who traveled back from even farther into the future to destroy it.

Merlin was the son of an incubus and a human, condemned to age backwards, so that he predicted the past, remembered the future and used his skills to preserve the time line. At his death on March 14, 1879, which was not of old age but rather of pre-infancy, I held his baby hand and reminded him of who he was.

Thus grounded in the moment, Merlin became an infant again and began to age forward. Then I swapped him with the stillborn son of Hermann and Pauline Einstein, who would christen him Albert, so that he could grow up to once again preserve the time line.

Finally, bereft of my powers, I stand by this window in my own time: June, 2000. I have been told that my mission is done, my purpose in history served. Now I have nothing to do but wait for death. I look down on the foreign country that is now my home.

A few cars, a few more red taxis and a light bus, yellow with a green top, drive on the left side of the road. This is no longer an odd sight to me, an American who has lived in Hong Kong for six months. People walk across the road, near another construction site that will soon become another high-rise building.

The two constants of Hong Kong are the people and the buildings. Beyond the site, a blue ocean and a green mountain. Atop the mountain, more towering buildings reach up into a polluted sky. A single double-decker bus passes below me.

I view life, but I am no part of it. I sit alone, writing novels that will never be seen, stories that will never be understood, poems that will never be read aloud before the awed masses or the small crowds in the coffee shops. All is empty, futile, meaningless.

I am a most unremarkable man. Neither too tall nor too short, too thin nor too fat, too handsome nor too ugly. My hair is neither short nor long, neither brown nor red. My skin is neither tan nor pale and it is freckled but not noteworthy in its freckling. I am 36, almost 37, neither young nor old. All in all, I am painfully and boringly average.

I have been many things in my lifetime: a security guard, a dishwasher, a copier repairman, a high-powered executive secretary, a web

site consultant. My dream was to write, but I was too busy with work. When I finally left all that to pursue the dream of writing, when my world consisted wholly of free time, I learned that I had nothing to say.

Then I was summoned by the Guardian of the Time Line. Great and wondrous adventures awaited me, of the sort that have been told many times before but which made me feel fresh and alive with their immediacy. Unlike the masses below me, I served a purpose. Such fulfillment I have never known before or since and all else pales beside the memory now.

Finally, standing before this window in my isolation, my mind drifts to my own past. My own time line. Tragic mistakes that would have haunted me, had I not suppressed them. And why, I wonder, can I not address them as well? If I can correct the time line of all humanity, why not that of a single man? Why can't I go back and change what is into what should be?

I call to the Guardian, knowing that He will not respond. Why should He? Honestly, why did the Guardian do anything? He summoned and I obeyed. That was all. But I call to Him nonetheless.

I find myself standing on an island. It is surrounded not by water, but by darkness. The landscape is so unremarkable as to be foreboding. There is no sound, no smell, no gentle breeze blowing across my skin or making the grass rustle in its wake. The sky, which is neither blue nor gray, is vaguely illuminated as if by an artificial sun.

I wait for the Guardian to speak. He had done so many times, in a dispassionate voice that sounded human but did not feel human. It emanated from nowhere and everywhere, auditory but not visual, without the unconsciously observed vibration that produces all sounds. But this time, it is silent. Without that sound, I am alone. To close my eyes would make the deprivation complete.

"Are you here?" I ask.

"Yes."

"Send me back to 1985."

"Why?"

"Because I ask."

Is the silence an affirmation or a negation? I wait for a reply, but there is none. Finally, I speak. A date, a time, a location. Then I find myself standing there.

My brother, Barry, joined the Army as a boy of 18 and left it as a man of 20. He returned home with his wife of two years and became a jail deputy. Now I am standing outside their apartment.

The Guardian was efficient. I could not remember Barry's address, only that it was on 46th Street. I'd fully expected to walk, but I am glad that I haven't been forced to because I am barefooted. I am clad just as I'd been in my Hong Kong apartment, in a white Giordano T-shirt and black swim trunks with empty pockets. My latest trip through time is so unexpected that I am totally unprepared.

The apartment is on the corner of two small dark streets, one of a set of five duplexes with an undersized parking lot. I look at Barry's apartment. The lights in the one beside it are off. I suppose that it has to be empty, as no one had heard the gunshot when Barry killed himself.

I quietly creep to the closest window and peer into the living room. Fortunately, the curtains are slightly cracked. I see the glass-topped coffee table. I remember riding with Barry to a run-down furniture store beside a flea market to buy that table. We'd set the cardboard-wrapped glass atop his new car and held it through the windows as he'd driven across town. The following week, I almost dropped a large metal ball bearing onto it, which would have shattered it. At the last moment I'd deflected its fall.

Barry is sitting on the couch. My heart seems to stop at the sight of him. A wave of emotion rises up within me and I fight without success to hold back my tears. Only a thin pane of window glass now separates me from my little brother, in my heart dead for almost 15 years.

Barry had always been blessed with good looks. He is dressed in a tight blue T-shirt that highlights the firm muscles in his arms and chest, and tight designer jeans. He has brown hair, fine and straight, parted down the middle. I remembered the times he'd combed it while looking in the rear view mirror of his car. He took pride in his appearance, of which I'd always been jealous.

His blue eyes are usually firm and confident, but at this moment they are red-rimmed and filled with tears. His normally smooth white skin, with freckles so pale as to be invisible to me from my vantage point, is creased by his grimace of agony.

As a child, I was the intellectual. Barry was the one with common sense, the strong one, the golden boy who was destined to succeed. Not only did everyone know it, but everyone made a point of telling us.

I move my head to see the rest of the couch and the coffee table. Atop the tinted glass of the table is a gleaming gun. This is the gun that his wife had given him, as he was too young to buy his own. I'd bought him the bullets. Now, unless I do something, this is the weapon with which he will kill himself.

Barry rises from the couch and cries and screams and rages and paces the floor of his beautiful home. His heart is breaking and I know that I am part of the reason. Then he strides out of the living room. I am afraid of what will happen with him out of my sight, but I try to calm my beating heart. The gun is still on the coffee table. My memory tells me that Barry killed himself while sitting on that couch. No, he is okay. I only have to wait.

Barry returns to the living room carrying a piece of paper and a pen. This must be it, I think. I remember the note that he left to his ex-wife. He starts writing and that is my cue. I quietly rush from the window to the front door and ring the doorbell. I wait for a moment, listening intently, but there is only silence. I pound on the door with both hands and yell.

"Hey Barry! It's Michael. Open up."

That, I know, will work. Barry would never kill himself with me standing outside the door.

"I'll be right there," he says finally. He is totally unsuccessful in hiding the sorrow in his voice.

Next, I hear him moving through the apartment, hastily putting away the pistol and the half-written suicide note. The magnitude of what I am doing strikes me anew. I wipe the tears from my eyes and struggle to compose myself.

Barry finally opens the door. I raise my eyes slightly to meet his gaze, as he is six feet tall. I've forgotten how strong and how handsome he looks, and how young. But mostly I've forgotten how it feels just to be able to look at my brother. I fight back another wave of emotion.

"You look like shit," he says.

After my momentary confusion, I realize that I've aged 15 years since he's last seen me. Like Mom's face, mine is covered with the lines of premature aging. My hair, like Mom's, is scattered with quite a bit of gray. Ever the observant one, Barry notices these things about me even in these circumstances.

"I just finished a 20-hour shift," I reply lamely.

Barry steps aside and I enter his apartment.

"Cathy's working," he says, unable to look me in the eye when he speaks because it is a lie. Barry's voice is not like mine. We grew up in North Carolina and he still has the accent. I've lost my Southern accent living in Florida and later in Hong Kong. Mom, it seemed, had never had one.

"What are you doing here?" Barry asks me, closing the door behind me.

"I needed to talk to you."

"What about?"

"Me being a jackass," I reply and try to grin. "C'mon, let's sit down."

I wordlessly follow my brother into the living room. He sits on the couch, the one where I know he'd killed himself before. I sit in a nearby chair so that I can face him.

"How's it going?" I ask lamely.

"Okay," he mumbles.

What do I say? I know the answer to every question I can ask him. How many times have I replayed the details of his brief life in my mind?

"Does the job still suck?" I manage to say.

"Yeah." Communication was never one of Barry's strong suits.

"Still strip-searching inmates who spit on you and pour cups of piss on you when you walk down the halls. And breaking up fights with the firehouse."

"Yeah," he mumbles, then finally looks into my eyes. "Not too fast, though." The ghost of a smile flickers across his face. "If one of 'em kills the

other, that's one less I've gotta watch."

"It'd be better if you were out on the road, stopping those bad guys and helping the people they hurt."

"It doesn't look like that's gonna happen."

"Just be patient."

"Like I've been all year? Fuck man, I'm not ever gonna get out of that jail."

"Unlike the guys you watch over."

Barry drops his eyes momentarily. "Yeah."

"Got any new comic books?"

"Nah. No time."

"I know why you collect them."

"Yeah, they'll be worth a lot of money some day. I've got some I could go sell right now for two or three times what I paid for 'em."

"No, that's not it. You wanna be like those comics."

Barry's first instinct is to deny my words, but he doesn't. His firm gaze challenges me, drawing out the speech I'd rehearsed in my mind hundreds of times since his death.

"When Sam beat Mom, we couldn't stop him. All we could do was hold in the rage. So she beat him off with a chair and left his ass. Then when Ray Parker stalked us and beat Mom, all we could do was hold in the rage. And all the other guys, like Eugene—"

"Who gives a fuck about all that?" he yells.

"We do."

He glares at me angrily, wanting to rage at me, but he decides against it. He seems drained.

"We lived in a fucking car for three months with an escaped convict who beat Mom in those motel rooms at night," I continue. "But how could we stop him? You were 11. Just a boy."

"I could've stopped him!"

"No, all we could do was what we did. Hold in the rage and the pain. And now you're a cop—you were an MP—but you still can't do a damn thing for anybody. Especially not Mom."

Barry rises angrily to his feet and storms across the living room. "Fuck you."

"Is that why you hit Cathy?"

Barry whirls to face me.

"Is that why she went back to Dennis?" I add, rising angrily to my feet. "Is that why you were sitting here with a gun writing a goddamn suicide note? Cathy you fucking bitch. You always wanted me dead. You fucking slut. Now you'll get what you always wanted. I hate you. Fucking bitch. I hope this makes you happy. I know it will. This is all because of you, you fucking bitch. It's all because of you."

Barry says nothing, but there are tears in his angry eyes. Finally, a

sign that my words are getting through. There is also a question in those eyes. How in the hell did I know what he wrote?

"You called me up and asked me to go to a movie with you," I continue. "I said I was too busy, that you should go with your wife. But I didn't know she'd left you. So you're going to get all depressed and blow your fucking brains out, because of what I said. Asshole!"

Barry begins walking toward me.

"Mom's gonna hear about it on her birthday. You were supposed to take her out for dinner, but fuck that. And then after we've gone to the funeral home to see your coffin, closed of course, we'll go back home. Tom'll be there, since he's your friend too and he'll want me to go back with him and open the fucking coffin, just so we'll know you're really dead."

"Shut up," he snaps, but weakly. Ignoring him, I continue raving about my own pain. He stops walking.

"I'm guessing you put the gun in your mouth and not to your temple—that way it won't slip. Does the fucking jaw fall off when you do that? Probably! Leaving what, a neck with a bloody stump of spinal cord sticking out? Do I really want to see that? Do I really want to know that you did that because I wouldn't go to a fucking movie with you?!"

Barry simply stands there, facing me. He smells vaguely of Aramis. His expression changes from sad to challenging, then angry, then back to sad and finally just confused. Only his stance, shoulders back and chest forward and back ramrod straight, continues to challenge me. In his face, he is the insecure little boy I'd known long ago.

"That's it, asshole, bottle it up and be a fucking he-man. That's what gets you killed."

"Fuck you," he says finally, turning away.

"Forget about Cathy and think about Mom. She's only got four years to live. Do you want her to spend them knowing you killed yourself and wondering what she did wrong?"

Barry turns again and glares at me angrily.

"Do you?!" I repeat.

I want to reach out and hug him, but something in his expression stops me.

"That's right, Mom's got an aneurysm so deep in her brain that nobody could fix it even if they knew about it and she's going to die on her 52nd birthday. You're supposed to take her out in a few days for her 48th birthday. Do you really want her to learn on her birthday that you killed yourself?"

Barry can't sustain his anger. He starts crying. This is his problem—our problem—holding back the insecurity and the sadness for fear of appearing weak. In my long life, I've done some terrible things because of that, but in his short life he'd only done one. He'd killed himself.

"Remember Club Boulevard, when you beat up the big bully on the school bus for picking on your little friend? Remember when you beat up

Buddy—B-U-gee-gee-Y—because you thought he was picking on me?"

"He was picking on you."

"I didn't want to hit him because he was retarded, but I was going to do it before you jumped in and broke his glasses. That's you, protecting the weak. What we wanted to do whenever someone beat Mom or raped her, but we couldn't. It's who you are now, sitting in that jail and looking at those scumbags instead of stopping them."

Barry's body slumps, as if tired of the pretence of being strong and unemotional. His eyes fall from my face to gaze at the floor.

"Remember Princess?" I continue. "A little kitten eating out of a dumpster, but you called her over to you and we raised her. That's you. You're a hero. And that's why you're so upset, not because of Cathy."

"That fucking bitch! She left my ass and went back to Dennis."

"I know," I say gently. "I know. And I know it hurts like hell. You rescued her too, man, and now she's gone. But that's not why you're thinking of sticking that gun in your mouth. Not over a woman."

"I love her!" Halfway between anger and pain, his yell begins as a firm shout but falls weakly to the floor.

"I know you do. She knows it too. And hell yes, it hurts. But not bad enough for this."

Barry sinks back to the couch. I sit in the chair, facing him.

"Look at me," I tell him. "Look at your stupid big brother."

Barry reluctantly meets my gaze.

"Look at me," I say. "I lied about the long shift. I'm not that 22-year-old idiot who you called on the phone a little while ago. I'm 36 now."

Barry glances at me. "Fuck you."

"Look at me," I command.

Barry looks at me hard.

"See the lines? See the gray hairs? Did I have those the last time you saw me? Was I this big?" I lay my hands on my stomach. "Was I this fat? I'm from the future—never mind how. Let me tell you what I remember. You're sitting here on this couch, thinking how bad you hurt and how mad you are at Cathy. She hurts you, you hurt her because you're hurting, she hurts you back and on and on it goes. And then finally you decide to show her sorry ass once and for all and stick that gun in your mouth and pull the trigger. But what about me?"

"What about you?! You told me to go do something with my wife!"

"That was wrong. I was stupid. Jesus Christ, you know how fucked in the head I am. But I always loved you." I fight back my own tears. "You're my brother, man. And if you do this, it'll hurt me. Fifteen years later I'm still crying because I know I killed you. And what about Mom? You know how much she loved us, how much she gave up for us. Don't do this to her."

Barry cries out loud, something I've never seen him do before. Never in the 20 years of his life. He'd done it, of course, on this night, but I hadn't

seen that because I was sleeping in Mom's apartment half a mile away.

"You'll be 21 in two months. Less, really. And then if you're not out of the jails and on the road, you can try at another police department. In Tampa or anywhere else. You'll be old enough. Or if you feel you can't hang on that long, just go see Mom. You know she loves you. You know she wants to see you."

"Yeah," he finally admits, wiping at his eyes and looking at me again.

"I'll be there. I might be okay or I might be an asshole again, but you know I love you even if I don't say it. But think of Mom. Make her last four years happy. Don't do this to her."

"How'd you get here?"

"Does it matter?"

"No," he says finally and then he chuckles quietly. "Maybe I'm fucking losing it."

"Maybe we both are. But you know you're not the only one to think of killing yourself. You don't know how many times I've been at home alone, walking through the house and then just suddenly fell on my knees and started crying and wishing I was dead."

"Why didn't you?" he asks after a moment.

I make a point of meeting his questioning gaze firmly. "I don't own a gun."

Barry drops his eyes to the floor.

"I'm serious, bro, I'm from the future. Don't do this."

"But it hurts!" he admits. Finally, the pretence has fallen away and the real Barry is exposed.

"It's okay to be sad. It's okay to cry. It took me most of my life to learn that, but it's okay."

"You told me to—!"

"Fuck what I told you! I was stupid, okay?!"

Barry fights against his tears.

"That's all we've done, all our lives," I say. "Fight what we were feeling. That's our fucking problem. Why we end up hurting the wrong people."

I wait in silence while Barry cries. I want to walk across the floor, to hold him, to hug my little brother, but I decide against it. He doesn't want me to do that, not even now.

Finally he looks up and wipes at his eyes again. I notice the fading pimple between his eyebrows.

"So what now?" he asks.

"Give me your gun."

"I need that."

"For what? You can't take it into the jails. Look, you'll be 21 in less than two months and then you can buy another one. Unless you really think you'll get out of the jails before then, you don't need it."

There it is, out in the open, my purpose for being here. I can't say anything that will stop my brother from killing himself in the next 15 years. My words can't ensure that he won't kill himself this night, or tomorrow night, or the night after that. But if I can just get that gun away from him, then he'll have to wait for a month and a half. It's all I can do. That, and hope for the best.

"I'd give you the money," I add with a grin, "But I left my wallet at home." I see no need to tell him that it's full of foreign currency, probably signed after 1985.

"How'd you get here?" he asks again, looking firmly into my eyes. "Damn, you look fucking old. But I want to know how you got here."

"First," I state, "You give me the gun."

Barry sits silently for a long moment, lost inside his own mind and his own feelings.

"Do it for Mom. Don't ruin her birthday."

After a long moment, Barry speaks. "It's in the kitchen. The drawer beside the sink."

I walk into the kitchen, retrieve the gun and unload it. A .357 Police Magnum. The bullets thump onto the counter. I slip the gun into my pocket. "I'd hate to blow my dick off."

"I doubt you could hit it, it's so small."

I chuckle. I move toward the living room and the gun falls to the floor. It's too heavy to carry in the small pocket of my swimming trunks. I pick up the gun and carry it to the living room.

"So how'd you get here?" he repeats.

"I don't know."

"That's bullshit."

"No, seriously, I don't know. Some damn thing called the Guardian just snatches me up and sends me through time. That's all I know about it, really."

"That's a bullshit answer."

I stop walking and stand before him. "Does that mean you want your gun back?"

"No."

"Good, because I wasn't going to give it to you anyway."

"I could beat your ass and take it."

"I could hit you with it, too."

"You're too pussy."

Barry looks at me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Probably because he's feeling too many things at once, I decide, and probably fighting against them all. Finally he rises to his feet and stares at my aging eyes. He silently reaches out and hugs me. I wrap one arm, the one that isn't holding the gun, around him and hug him back.

Finally, Barry pulls away. "Now what?"

"Short term, call my ass again and make me go to a fucking movie. Then take Mom out for her birthday. Long term, don't be such a fucking loner."

"What about Cathy?"

"I don't know. If you want her back, give it your best shot. If not, find somebody else. You're the stud in the family, not me."

"That's the truth."

"I think we oughta hang around until Mom dies and then go back to North Carolina. That's what I ended up doing the last time around. But the main thing is, we figure it out together. We're still a family."

"Yeah."

"It'd be a shame for Mom to have done all that for us just so you could ruin it with something stupid." I grin. "I'll do enough stupid shit for both of us."

Barry grins back, a natural expression that makes him look mischievous. I'd forgotten how much I loved that simple expression. I let the tears run from my eyes.

"You're an asshole," he states.

"What?"

"Coming in here like that and being a hero. You're an asshole."

I laugh through my tears. "Yeah. I know."

"Your ass deserves to be woke up," he states.

"Yeah, it does. Don't even call me. Do like you used to do. Drive to the house and pour some water on my face."

Barry grins again. "I will. And quit crying, you fucking wuss."

I nod because I am unable to speak.

I stand before the Guardian once more. Or on the Guardian, I don't know, but I've been here so many times before that I no longer care. I drop Barry's gun upon the ground. Then I fall to my knees and cry. My little brother, who I'd loved so much. I'd never been able to tell him. Until now.

Finally, I get to my feet and wipe at my eyes. I look at the gun, but I can think of no reason to pick it up. I don't want it. After a minute, I change my mind. I pick up the gun and throw it as hard as I can. It sails off into the darkness. I don't hear it fall.

"I'm ready to return," I state. "To the second after I left, standing before my window in Hong Kong."

Once again, there are no fireworks. No crashing of sounds, no bright lights, no special effects. I simply stand before the window as before, my memory of the past unchanged. Is this normal? Probably, but I've never changed my own time line before.

I walk across the small living room, past the ever-present computer and to the bookshelf. My keys are on a shelf, before a stack of paperbacks, atop my wallet and my passport. Attached to the key ring is an aqua blue piece of string, woven into an intricate pattern of knots, with a painted metal

owl on the opposite end. There is a key to my flat and a key to my mailbox. There is also one of Barry's Army dog tags. Shortly after his death, I'd retrieved it from his personal effects at the police station.

"Guardian," I say. There is no reply.

It seems that nothing has changed. If I still have Barry's dog tag, then he's still dead. I reach up to the bookshelves for a photo album and turn to the section where I keep Barry's photos. The first is of him as a baby; the last is when he graduated from the Police Academy. There are no new photos.

I look at the watch on my wrist. It is 4:06 in the afternoon. That means it is 4:06 in the morning back in North Carolina, where my father is sleeping. Calling him to ask if and when Barry had died would be the height of stupidity.

I sit at the computer and turn it on. I wait as it boots up, knowing that I am only confirming what I already know. It's a slow old computer, rendered slower by sitting before it and waiting. Finally it's done and I open the word processor. I open a long-saved and long-forgotten manuscript. A quick search leads me to the essay I'd written shortly after Barry's suicide. I read the first sentence.

"My brother, Barry, was 16 months my junior. On September 21, 1985, he put a .357 Magnum into his mouth and spray painted the back wall. He was 20 years old and it was my mother's birthday."

The manuscript is unchanged, as is my past.

For Barry

"Wish not so much to live long, as to live well."

—Benjamin Franklin

"Death is not a door that we walk toward. Death is the act of walking itself."

—John Fowles

My brother, Barry, was 16 months my junior. On September 21, 1985, he put a .357 Magnum into his mouth and spray painted the back wall. He was 20 years old and it was my mother's birthday.

Why did my brother choose to end his own life? I don't know. The answer to that question died with him. But still, perhaps I can make a few observations, exploit my misfortune, and pick the bones of a dead man.

Shortly before graduating from high school, Barry talked to an Army recruiter. He wanted to follow in my footsteps and become an electronics technician, but I didn't think the field would suit him. An eye test revealed his inability to distinguish between two shades of yellow-green, so he had to choose another field. He chose to become an MP, a Military Policeman.

In many ways, we were alike. We were both idealists, wanting to change the world in our own way. I meant to do it with my writing and my philosophy. He would do it through a career in law enforcement. I knew this was right for him. As usual, his approach was much more practical than mine.

Barry entered the military and married his first love soon thereafter. He enjoyed a brief but brilliant career because he had found a purpose. All was well with the world. But at the end of his two years, he let his wife talk him into quitting.

Back home, I researched the local law enforcement agencies for him. He was 20 years old, meaning only the Sheriff's Department would hire him. He returned home, applied, and was hired to guard the jails.

I remember Barry's time at the Police Academy only too well. Typed notes were required, but he couldn't type, so I did this for him. I learned about law enforcement in the process. He enjoyed practicing his hand-to-hand combat training on me a bit too much, but again, I learned much in the process.

We went to the old haunts together. He could still play a video game for 30 minutes on a quarter. When we played doubles, my purpose was to give him two-minute breathers.

We went to a movie together and some fellow behind us wanted to start a fight to impress his girlfriend. The old Barry would've "kicked some ass," but my little brother was a man now.

He test-drove a sports car not because he wanted to buy it, but just because he wanted to drive one. He drove it 70 miles per hour on a winding road, explaining, "This is how I would really drive it." He kept telling the salesman, who was on the job for his first day, "I'll show them my badge," and flooring the accelerator. He didn't have a badge yet.

I also remember the last time that I talked to Barry. It was maybe a week before he killed himself. He asked me to go to the movies with him, but I was too wrapped up in my own life. I can even quote my last words to him. "Why don't you go do something with your wife?" He never told me that she had left him a month earlier.

Thus ended Barry's grand dream of changing the world. He sat behind a desk, reading paperbacks and spraying inmates with a fire hose to break up fights. He walked down halls as inmates spat on him and flung cups of piss at him. He saw human nature at its ugliest. But more importantly, he was not fighting for the good cause.

Barry went to work; he went home; he paid bills. He was utterly alone wherever he was. Many people do this and perhaps a rare few even have the courage to ask *is this all there is?* But perhaps saying yes is more painful to nobler souls.

Perhaps he should not have bottled everything up inside until it exploded, but we all know that "real men" are tough. Perhaps it would have been more bearable if he had not been alone, but everyone close to him is to blame for that. But we can say "perhaps" and "he should have" all we want. He's still dead.

Thinking back on our lives, I realized that my little brother had always been a role model for me. He still is. Much later I realized that he thought of me the same way. He looked up to me and I never knew until it was too late.

I liked to think that he could have always come to me if he had a problem. After his death, I criticized him because he didn't come to me. But then I remembered that he did come to me. I told him to get the hell out of my life and he did exactly that.

You may reply that it isn't my fault, because I didn't know he would kill himself. Perhaps. But does that mean it's okay to treat someone like that the rest of the time? No. It is never okay. By turning him away, I killed my brother just as surely as if I'd pulled the trigger.

§

I wrote the above thoughts shortly after Barry's death. I believed them. I believed that I had put my loss in the past, come to terms with my feelings and moved on. The casket was closed and Barry and his memory were buried. But then, almost 16 years later, something unexpected happened. I found love.

When Barry died, I did not bury him. I buried my heart. I married the girl I was dating at the time, got a steady job, supported a household and built a life for myself. For this, I have no regrets. But I wasn't happy and I didn't know it. In this, I was much less honest than my little brother.

Now I like to think that I've finally learned a little about love. Not family love, as that is usually given and usually taken for granted. I mean the kind of love where you bare your soul to a complete stranger, where someone sees into the ugliness of your heart and loves you in spite of it. The kind of love I'd have never dreamed of finding until, one day, it finally happened.

Looking back at Barry's life, I doubt he ever knew such love. Without it, there was no joy in his life. That's why he ended it. Again, he was always more practical than I am.

I would have loved Barry even if he weren't my little brother, but I never told him. Now it's too late. Could I have prevented this tragedy? I'll never know now. I missed the warning signs and he blew his brains out.

The Boatman's Getting Restless

I lay in a coffin, but I was not dead. My best friend had buried me while I was still alive, because that is what I wanted him to do. This was the first time that we had done this, but it certainly would not be the last.

As I lay beneath the satin sheets, I wondered if Death would come. I didn't know if He would see that this was a trick or if He would think I was dead. But this was the only way to find out what, if anything, lay beyond.

I was dressed in my finest suit, stripped of all my possessions, made up to look embalmed, and drugged to appear dead until long after the ceremony. I had just now awakened. My friend, William, would dig me up 24 hours after my burial. If I had not been visited by that time, then this would have all been in vain.

If someone had told me a few days ago that I would be doing this, I would have called him a madman. But this insatiable curiosity had been gnawing at me, just as the worms gnawed at the bodies around me. I was compelled to do this.

The knowledge of what lies beyond is useless to one who lies beyond with it. Man should know, once and for all, what happens at death. So much of our lives are spent dealing with death and for me it had become an obsession. I simply had to know what happened at death. We all need to know.

Family, friends and loved ones spend their whole lives fleeing death. Then with illness, injury, or old age, they wonder. Should they embrace death, or should they endure pain and disability and the inability to live life to the fullest simply because death is so horrible?

Someone needed to venture to the other side and then return, with the answer to this greatest of questions. Just think how much easier would life be if we knew how it ended.

I don't know how long I was in my cramped coffin, surrounded by stale air that I could barely breathe. My body began to tingle, like when an arm or a leg falls asleep, except that it was all throughout my body. I tried to shift in my coffin, but I was not able to move.

Is this how it feels to die? I wondered. *The air might not just be stale. My fresh air may have been cut off. Perhaps a bit of dirt fell over the narrow hole to the surface. I may be breathing the waste of my own lungs and I might actually be dying in here.*

The pain grew worse. I tried to scream, but I could not feel my mouth moving. I could not feel my throat. I tried again to move my body, but nothing changed. Was the coffin so tight, or was something else wrong with me? Again, I wondered if I was dying. Perhaps I was already dead.

Suddenly the pain was gone and in its place was no sensation of

feeling at all. The numbness moved up from my hands and feet through my arms and legs, then finally up my torso. I felt like a head with no body.

And then something yanked at my head like plucking an apple from a tree. A hazy but intense light replaced the blackness of my coffin. I tried to close my eyes and the light vanished. After a moment, I tried to open them again.

I was standing on the bank of a river. It extended as far as I could see in both directions and I could not see across its width. There was no wind and if there had been wind there were no trees or grasses to wave in it. The sky above was a hazy gray. No clouds and no direct sunlight. Just a foggy haze. It could have been an overcast day, or I could have been in a cave. There was no sound here and no smell. I had no idea where I was or if I was.

At least now I knew that something existed beyond death. I still had to find out what that was and get back. I wondered how far I would get before someone or something discovered that I was still very much alive. (I hoped that I was alive.)

A boat appeared at the edge of my vision and gradually drew closer. I was eventually able to distinguish it as a rowboat. As it neared me, I was able to see that the oarsman wore a black cloak and hood. His tan flesh clung to his high-cheekboned face, giving him an eerie visage.

As the boat touched upon the shore, I noticed many people around me—enough to fill the boat, in fact. The oarsman extended a board from boat to shore and the dead began walking across in a single file. No one rushed. I took my place in line.

Each person handed the oarsman a coin as he boarded the boat. I suddenly realized that I had no money. I had left all my possessions behind. Unless—!

I clasped at my chest to find my good luck piece, a \$20 gold coin that had been turned into a necklace. I took off the necklace, removed the chain and gave the coin to the oarsman. Lucky thing I had it with me, I thought. Heck, lucky thing that I'd found it in the first place.

When I stepped onto the boat, I unconsciously tried to keep my balance as it sank. But it stayed at the same level and I stumbled. I caught myself against the sides, righted myself and quickly moved to sit on the boat.

Beside me was a ghostly old man. He was a translucent gray-brown and his skin was horribly wrinkled. There was a jagged black-rimmed hole in his cheek, as if some cancer had eaten through his face. I turned quickly away and fought my revulsion.

In the back of my mind was a nagging disappointment. This was not at all what I expected to find. It looked more like something out of a bad movie.

I remembered Dante's *INFERNO* and it sent a shiver up my spine.

When Dante's live self boarded Charon's boat, it almost sank. But when I stepped onto Charon's boat, it stayed at the same level. As if I had no longer had a body.

The river was murky. There really was no sky, just a gray haze that grew thicker as it rose, until finally one could not see through it. All was deathly silent. The air was cold. An even stronger chill came from the closeness of the dead old man to my side and from the dead young man at my other side with a gaping hole in his chest. I squeezed my body in tightly, afraid to touch either of them.

I was genuinely terrified at the prospect that I had died in my coffin. I had felt like I couldn't breathe in there and I felt like I couldn't even breathe now.

As the boat's keel touched upon the opposite shore, it thumped, breaking the deathly silence. The oarsman extended the plank to the shore and we crossed it in a single file. Again, no one hurried, for they had all the time in the world. I waited until everyone else was gone before I left the boat.

I followed a dark, silent figure down a path. It was not the oarsman, though he wore a similar cloak and hood. I don't know what he looked like because I was afraid to look.

The path led to a huge castle, an ugly brown monstrosity made of ancient bricks that had long since lost their color. Once we were across the moat, the drawbridge creaked shut. We walked down a long hall. At its end was a huge oaken door.

A river, a moat, a drawbridge, a long hall and a huge oaken door. How many more boundaries? I wondered. How many more symbols, how many more things to cross? Was this a vision of death or a fantasy of wish fulfillment?

At this point, I hoped it was fantasy. I hoped that death was not like this. But if this was death and I returned to life, did it truly matter? I would only die again and return here and the time between would be like the blink of an eye.

The cloaked figure pulled the door open and the light nearly blinded me. I took a step forward, straining to comprehend the being before me. It appeared to be shaped like a man. Surely the Creator needed no material body.

Jesus had said that "no man come to the Father, but by me." But Lucifer was referred to as The Shining One. Which was this?

"Ernest," said a human-sounding voice. "Ernest, it's me, William. Your 24 hours are up. What happened?"

The Return of The Boatman

I opened my eyes to see only darkness. I did not know how long I had been unconscious or how much time I had left. I had no concept of time. There was no way to know if it was day or night.

I could feel wood against my body. I could smell the pine of my coffin and my own sweat. I could hear my slow, rhythmic heartbeat. I could faintly taste my own breath. These were my sole sources of sensory input.

Shakespeare called Death "the undiscovered country, from whose bourne no traveler returns." Tonight I would discover that country and I would return. All the waiting was over and now I had resumed my life's work.

An indeterminate amount of time passed. I rose up from my coffin, outside my body, and hovered above my unmarked grave. I could see the ground and yet it was translucent. I could see my coffin and yet I could also see through it.

I looked down at my body. I had forgotten that I looked like that. I was used to seeing myself in a mirror or a picture. But both were flat and neither was full size. But now there it was, full view, about five feet away. I had changed since last seeing myself that way.

My face was covered with wrinkles and there were dark purple bags beneath my intense brown eyes. My hairline had receded halfway across my scalp and the hair that remained was more gray than black now. I was tall and thin, almost skeletal. Somewhere in my mind, the word *skeletal* almost made me laugh.

Emotion surged up within me. To feel this again, after so much time, was pure ecstasy. It was worse than an addiction and yet so much better. To be buried so often and then to be deprived for so long had been pure hell. But the painful waiting only made this night more heavenly.

Fleeing Death is a mistake born of ignorance. When we attain the wisdom to realize this, we stop fleeing and allow Death to take us. Death is a beautiful woman who we should allow to embrace us. Death is orgasmic.

My body was very different from the body in the coffin below me. I was a blob floating in thick clear water, but at the same time I had arms and legs and a body and a head. I knew that I could change shape as needed.

One of the difficulties with near-death experiences is the failure of language to describe them. So many things on "the other side" can be described as several different, seemingly contradictory things. It seems impossible to be both a blob and a body, yet "over here" it was perfectly natural.

I heard the comforting voices of relatives and loved ones who were here to help me. There were no words here. When I heard familiar voices,

they did not speak. They communicated in thoughts and feelings of such completeness and clarity that spoken language was useless. I felt their joy and their unconditional love. I had always longed for this part of the experience, as I had never known such belonging in life.

Something pulled me through the voices and toward a brilliant white light. I did not resist. The light engulfed me. It was a light, but it was also water. It was like being in a vast ocean. Somehow I knew that the watery light was made of human souls.

The fact that I had seen the light many times before did nothing to pale the experience. Memory alone could never prepare me for such an overwhelming love, for such total and complete acceptance of who I was.

The light non-verbally asked me a question that led me to evaluate myself. I relived all the major events of my life with remarkable intensity. Everything that I had ever known and then forgotten, I felt again as if it were new.

Now I was at the beginning of the tunnel. Loved ones surrounded me. They communicated unconditional love, again, and yet they also told me that I must go back to my body. I firmed my resolve and resisted them all. Even if it meant my death, I had to know what waited at the end.

It is my time! I will not go back! I will go forward! I am ready to die.

Again, I rushed through the tunnel, sucked through it like dust in a vacuum with a painful crashing of sound around me. The light, which could not possibly have become more brilliant, did. It grew brighter and brighter, yet it was not painful or blinding because I had no eyes.

I was out of the tunnel! Now I found myself blinded by the light. It was in a distinct place above me and it was painful. I closed my eyes and concentrated upon my other senses. Why, I wondered, did I now have eyes?

Hands were holding me. The voices used spoken words that I did not understand, but they were overwhelmed with joy. I heard an infant crying in what was once my own voice.

I opened my eyes. I was the infant, being handed to my mother on a hospital bed. My father, my aunt, my grandmother, a doctor and a nurse all peered down at me.

Their faces changed into clock faces, all displaying different times and moving at different speeds. Their speech faded away until all that I could hear was the combined ticking.

Thirty-two years were condensed into what seemed like a minute. Clock-faced people moved around me and I around them, until finally I lay down in my coffin one last time.

Something pulled me from my body again and it disintegrated into dust inside the coffin. Only a skeleton remained. The coffin disintegrated and my bones turned powdery. Coffin and corpse blurred into one and mingled with the dirt around them.

I gazed at what was once my body, at what was now nothing. After a

long moment, something became distinct from the dirt. The powder separated into coffin and corpse once more. Coffin and corpse reintegrated into what they had been.

All of what I had just seen was reversing itself. I was being sent back. Once more I was denied that final step of seeing what was on the other side. I tried to shout, but I could not. Even if I could shout, I knew, it would not matter. I was in my coffin once more, crying with all the anguish of being denied my lifelong dream once more.

"I will go back," I muttered as William dug away the dirt. "I am not done yet. I will go back and I will finish my journey."

The Man Who Killed God

I killed my best friend, but he refused to stay dead.

My name is William Jackson. My best friend was Ernest Springer. I buried Ernest in my back yard, roughly once a week, for several months. I really don't know why, but he was drawn to the grave like a puppy to his food dish.

Then Ernest was committed to a mental institution until such time as he was cured. He was never cured, but he was eventually released. I buried him in my back yard seven more times. On the seventh time, his body remained dead.

My life turned complicated after that. Ernest's body was dead, but his soul was not. With no body of his own, he inhabited mine. It seemed like the ideal solution. Between the two of us, I figured, we could scrounge up one whole soul.

At first my life became better. Then Ernest turned evil. He made me do horrible things, unspeakable things. I tried to stop him, tried to force him out, but he was too strong. And then, one day, he left.

Such was my delusion. Of course it was a delusion. How could it be otherwise? I killed my best friend and instead of accepting it I went through this whole charade. But now I have progressed beyond believing that the evil spirit of Ernest Springer's undead soul possessed me.

After Ernest died, I quit using LSD and my life got better after that. Sometimes I'm surprised at how far I've come. I live alone now, able to take care of myself. I've held down the same job for almost a year and done well at it. I've even gone back to school, just because I enjoy learning. I often speak with the confidence of my convictions, defending an opinion that is totally mine. My life is good. My mind is healed.

Or so I believed. That belief would soon change.

§

The teacher read the poem aloud and closed the small book. His head dropped as if to silently contemplate the words that he had spoken. He was a small, aged, seemingly frail man. But that was only an illusion. His voice was commanding and his manner was animated. He turned to a student and spoke. He didn't shout, but everyone in the classroom jumped.

"Mr. Clayton. What did you think of the poem?"

The student's name was Nick Clayton. He was tall, tan and handsome. He had neat black hair, a neat black moustache and mildly Latin features. Were it not for his arrogance, he would have no personality at all.

"It sounds profound," Clayton replied. "But what does it really say? One might reply that you know what he means. But he didn't spell it out

because he lacks the talent."

"If he did spell it out," I replied, "You would disagree with it just because that's what you do."

"Only because it would be wrong."

"Is everything that you disagree with wrong?"

"Of course."

"What are you, then? Perfect?"

"Of course. Would you like to know why?"

I took the bait. "Yes, Nick, I would love to know why. Tell me why you are perfect."

"I am the only thing in the world that is real."

"What?"

"I made the rest of you up."

"So what does that make you? God?"

"Jehovah means I am. Who is your god? I am. The world is my idea. I am its god. If I truly know this, and I do, then I can do anything."

"That's enough of that," Professor Sarrett stated. "Let us move on to the next poem."

"Yes, sir," Clayton agreed. "But only because that is what I want us to do."

Professor Sarrett read the next poem in the small book, a somewhat predictable diatribe against war. Then he paused to let his words sink in, as if perhaps he was too moved to speak. It was a habit he showed regardless of how good, or how bad, the material was. Finally he turned to Nick Clayton.

"What do you think the author was trying to say?"

"He spent entirely too much time listening to old anti-war protest songs. He wanted to write one too, but he didn't know what to say, so he stole from everybody and called it his own."

"When you can't find a valid criticism," I replied, "You make the attack personal so that you can still feel superior."

"Is that right, Doctor Freud?" Clayton chuckled. "By the way, did you know that Freud was Oedipal?"

"And you're the poster boy for penis envy. The author's saying when you judge someone else so wrong that you have to kill him, just for disagreeing with you, that is the ultimate arrogance."

"So you think that's how the world works?"

"Maybe the author's a bit naive. But if you listen to his words, you hear the truth within them. To kill someone for having a different opinion is the ultimate arrogance."

The first time I said those words to Clayton, I don't think I was consciously aware of what I was doing. I repeated myself to see his reaction, because those were the same words I had said to Ernest Springer when he was inside me.

"The sanctity of human life is grossly overrated," Clayton replied. "There's far too much of it on the planet. I think I'll get rid of some."

"That's enough of that," Sarrett stated.

Clayton met the professor's challenging gaze with a bemused grin. After a moment, he turned to face me and spoke.

"Man is evil by nature. He wants to do so many things that he can't do, so he adopts a moral code and pretends to be good so that his impotence doesn't drive him insane. That's at the heart of what man is—taking all that he wants and still wanting more. Freud spent a lifetime looking for the conflict that causes insanity. I have seen the answer. Humans are the only moral animals on the planet and they are the only animals that go insane."

"Only if you believe in free will," said one student.

"A stone is rolling down the hill without knowing that gravity pulls it down," Clayton stated. "This is humanity, mistakenly believing itself to be free of the immutable laws of physics."

"You don't believe in free will?" I asked.

"No. Not at all."

"You really believe that you have no control over yourself? None at all? Not even your most innermost thought?"

"The perfect legal defense," Clayton replied. "It should be even more effective than claiming to hear voices inside one's head."

"Huh?"

"Why, my dear Mister Jackson, you seem disappointed. Perhaps you have me confused with someone else."

"You're not a determinist!" I shouted at him. "You're not."

"But I am a determinist, Mister Jackson. It was predetermined that I become a determinist. Was it predetermined that I have free will? No, but it was predetermined that I become aware of this. I consider myself fortunate, but of course this too was predetermined."

"Why are you lying?!"

"Mister Jackson—" Sarrett began.

"Why?!" I shouted at Clayton. "WHY?!"

"Such rage. Perhaps a hit of acid would calm your nerves."

You may call me Jehovah, said a voice inside my head, *because I am.* It was my voice, but they were not my thoughts. Ernest, who was now Nick, was talking to me the way that he had when he possessed me.

I leaped to my feet and lunged at him. My attack was swift and silent and his back was to me. He was facing the rest of the class, basking in the glow of their attention. There was no way that he could avoid me.

I sailed through the air and landed face first atop an empty desk. It promptly collapsed beneath me. How I went from closing in on Clayton's back to sailing through the air, I do not know.

But you do know. And remember, whatever you know, I know. Even

that which you dare not admit to yourself.

I ran from the classroom before my thoughts could betray me further.
It doesn't matter. Where you go, what you do, doesn't matter. You can't stop me. Nothing can stop me.

§

I hired a detective, the kind who thought his badge represented a job rather than any moral obligation. I gave him Nick Clayton's name, the name of the school, and the hours that Clayton was there. The man I hired next was not a detective. His job was to visit Clayton's house while Clayton was away.

When Nick Clayton got home from school, he would turn on the light. The voltage would ignite the gasoline inside and make it explode. That would kill Nick Clayton and I hoped it would send Ernest's soul to the other side.

"Maybe a hit of acid would calm your nerves," Clayton had said. Those weren't thoughts inside my head. Those were actual spoken words. But there was no way that Nick Clayton could know I was once a drug user.

If Nick Clayton was a real person who Ernest had invaded, there was no hope for him. He could no more force Ernest out than I could. Ernest had the power of a god and the mind of a man. A sick, perverted, dangerous man. He would deserve death even without the power. This is not the ultimate arrogance. It is simple fact.

Also, killing Ernest is not wrong because, to quote Ernest himself, Death is a beautiful woman. Death is orgasmic.

I stared at a clock. I don't know what I expected. If Ernest died, or if he caught the assassin, or if the assassin hauled ass with my money, I wouldn't know. I sat in my room, watching the clock and waiting for something, but there was nothing to wait for. Nonetheless, I waited.

I felt a rush of adrenaline, more intense than anything I had ever felt before. I was sitting on a bed in a cheap roadside motel and the sudden power surge made me fall backwards. After a moment, I opened my eyes and sat up. Then I probably smiled.

I became aware of things that I had not been aware of before. I heard the drip of the bathroom faucet. The room to my left was empty, but the couple in the room beside it was making love. To my right was the office. Someone was drinking coffee and watching television.

I could hear these things. With a bit more effort, I could see life through the eyes of these people, read their thoughts, and feel what it was like to be them. I was like a small fish in a great stream, in danger of being washed away.

I am William Jackson. I am in control.

I reached out with my mind, striving to sense something that had happened almost 800 miles away. I was still in the motel room and yet I saw

the interstate rushing below me. So seemingly contradictory and yet so natural to me now.

The smells and noises of the cars and the thoughts and sensations of their drivers could have easily distracted me. I shut them out, just as you can see something right before your eyes or something 30 feet in front of you, shutting out one to focus on the other.

I saw that Nick Clayton's house was on fire. I could smell the burning of the wood and fabric and, yes, human flesh. The body was burnt beyond recognition, but I knew that it was Nick Clayton. I just knew.

I found myself sitting in a room. My shoulders hurt. The wall before me was white, covered with thick padding. It was then that I realized where I really was. The straitjacket held my scrawny arms wrapped around me and I was sitting on the floor of a padded cell.

"You can't do this to me!" I shouted. "There's been a mistake! I'm God! God, do you hear me?! GOD!!"

I willed the straitjacket to be gone, but it did not happen.

I don't have the power!

Ernest was not gone. My assassin had killed Clayton, but he had not killed Ernest. Killing Ernest was no longer possible. And now, Ernest was punishing me for daring to defy him.

The world thought that I was insane, some crazy drug addict who killed Nick Clayton, but I was not. I was the man who tried to kill God. This was my punishment, my own private hell.

A Man Without Beliefs

I refuse to believe in anything.
I insist on questioning everything.
And reason will lead me to truth.
And truth is the greatest good—
At least that's what I believe.

Reflections From The Grave

To carry a dead brain in a body that survives
With my head always bent from the weight
While others feed me and empty my bedpan—
Give me the strength to pull the trigger!

To lie in a hospital bed with machinery
Pumping my heart and controlling my lungs
And a little machine with a steady "Ping"
Is more horrible than Hell!

I fear that when I am dead and gone,
They will stick my corpse in a box
And visit my grave to cry and moan.
What a terrible waste of space!

If the grass isn't trimmed and neat,
Or the flowers have withered and died,
Or no one visits except a dog and his urine,
I'll never know the difference!

No, let me live as long as I live
And die when my time is through.
I would rather a life that is short but full
Than one that is long, yet empty.

And when I have done all that I can do,
Don't cry and mourn for me.
And in the haste to prolong my life,
Don't prolong my death.

Give the body to science when I quit using it,
Or scatter the ashes over the sea.
Toss it in a power furnace along with the coal,
Or boil it in a pot and feed it to the kids.

The Enlightened Poet

A man is born and then he's a child
Then comes adulthood and death.
But what exactly should he do
Between his first and final breath?

Good and Evil, Heaven and Hell,
The Devil below and God above.
Live a good life and do what's right
And be rewarded by His Love.

Observe and study and experiment
And file and categorize.
Think and reason and try to learn
All about our lives.

Laugh and joke and have a good time.
Have a real blast before you go.
Life is made for living, so enjoy yourself.
Don't ask what you cannot know.

But alas, I believe that I have no answer
To the question of why man is truly here.
But then again, we must all believe in something
So I believe that I shall have another beer.

Mars, The Bringer of War

Whenever man receives the order
He goes out and fights another war.
He obeys the wills of demented rulers
Without asking what the bloodshed is for.

Each must feel that he is better than the rest,
And he loves to kill and kill again,
And feel he is living to serve a cause—
It appears that it shall never end.

Every man loves to kill one another,
And send each other to the grave,
To murder, to maim, to mutilate,
For he worships Death; he is its slave.

As the blood spews out in a steady stream
And the battlefield grows spattered and gory,
Man ignores the foul stench that fills the air
And revels in misguided glory.

When a man feels so stubbornly convinced
That his is the only view that is right
And that all who disagree are mistaken,
Does he truly have good reason to fight?

No man is better than another,
But alas, all are too blind to see—
So they kill all who disagree
And this is how it shall always be

Man will continue upon his foolish ways
Until Mother Nature is no more
And even then, he will continue to beat
A bloody path up to Death's door.

We claim to be so proud and mighty
As the helpless bodies rot and burn
And the mad desolation blindly rages on,
For we shall never learn.

Night Flight

When I was six, I discovered I could walk off the back of the couch without falling to the floor.

Mom, my brother Barry and I were visiting my cousins and my grandparents at their large, two-story home in the country. It was around 2:00 a.m., so no one was awake to scold me. I went downstairs, climbed atop the back of the overstuffed leather couch and walked off the edge.

I did not "believe" that I could do this; I simply knew. As long as I didn't look down, it would work. Don't ask me why. That's just the way it was.

With my mind blank, absent of thought or fear or any other feeling, I walked through the air and out the front door, ducking only slightly. Still walking in the air, I left the porch and turned around to look at the old house. I stood a few feet above the ground. The pre-dawn air was cool as it blew through my pajamas.

The house was large, made of brick, painted gray. It was set back far from the highway, in a clearing in the woods. I loved to just look at it. I'd always lived with Mom and Barry in small apartments, crowded by neighbors. But this was a house, big and beautiful and surrounded by open space. I could hear the wind and the faint sounds of a faraway car racing along the highway. I could smell pines, magnolias and honeysuckles.

I turned around. Grandad's store, made of aged dark wood, was up close to the road. My cousins loved to go inside and play pool and then lie to Gramma about it. I thought the store and playing pool were boring. Maybe I'd have liked the store better if Grandad had given me Orange Crushes. He gave my cousins free Orange Crushes, but I had to buy my own and I never had any money. I turned back to the house.

I wondered how far I could walk. Into the clouds? I looked up at the sky. No, it was a cloudless night, as the stars shone brightly. I felt that I could walk up into the sky and reach out and touch them. The moon, a small crescent, was obviously too far away for me to visit.

I decided to walk up to the second story and peer into the windows. I would see the bed where I had been sleeping with a cousin and the bed where Barry slept with another cousin.

Mom slept in the other upstairs bedroom. Gramma and Grandad slept in the two small downstairs bedrooms. The rooms were much colder upstairs, colder even than it was out here.

I walked up past the window and above the roof. The weathervane, shaped like a rooster, pointed in some direction I did not understand. The shingles were old, the grainy cover starting to flake off in a few spots. They looked dark gray or maybe black, but it was night. I'd have to come back up

here in the daytime and see how they looked.

Back when Mom and her brother were young, back when my grandparents were just parents, they planted stuff in the farmland behind the house. They grew enough to eat and to sell by the side of the road and someone else owned the store.

I had never seen the farmland. Behind the house were gum and pine trees and a path through them led to the land. I'd never bothered to go down the path. I decided to look at it, so I walked until I was a few feet above the roof. I stood maybe 20 or 25 feet above the ground.

I looked over the treetops and down to the farmland. It didn't look like farmland anymore. It was overgrown with some wild stuff that probably looked green in the daylight. Or maybe brown, since it was autumn and the grass was starting to die.

I started falling! I had looked down!

I quickly looked out in front of me and started walking again. I had to empty my mind, just like before, when I walked off the back of the couch. I stopped falling, but I almost bumped into the wall, just below the roof. I turned and kept walking, focused on a treetop up ahead. It was a dogwood tree.

I caught myself breathing hard, so I stopped myself. I was walking too fast, so I slowed down to normal. *That was close!* I turned back to the house and walked back up toward the roof.

I saw something hanging just underneath the roof, right where it met with the top of the wall. I walked over to see what it was. Since it was dark outside, I had to get close. It was a wasp's nest.

I stopped walking and stood in the air. I was maybe a foot away and maybe 20 feet above the ground. But I wasn't even thinking about that. I was watching the wasps. There were about a dozen hanging onto the nest and maybe 40 or 50 eggs in it. It was huge.

My cousins liked to find wasp nests. We would all get cans of hair spray and lighters and use them like blowtorches to declare war on the wasps. We were always getting chased by the ones we didn't kill, running like crazy so they wouldn't sting us. They usually got me because I ran the slowest.

I didn't know what we could do about this nest, though. It was too high to attack. But we had to do something, or else they'd come flying in through the windows and sting us, or just come down to the porch.

I was so wrapped up in my thoughts that I did not hear the door below me open.

"Michael!" Mom suddenly called out.

I looked down at her from force of habit. Then I fell to the ground.

Daisy's Story

My daddy was a very special daddy. He's the only two-legger who really understood me. They call themselves "people." You know how easy it is to talk to other four-leggers and how hard it is sometimes to talk to people. Daddy and I could talk as well as if he were a four-legger.

Their word for us, by the way, is "dog." I learned a lot of their language from Daddy. He was very smart that way, telling me things so I could understand them. And I'm pretty smart, too, and I have a fantastic memory.

Daddy found me in a cage, captured by the people, who were probably going to kill me. I was just a scared pup, alone and confused. He rescued me and then I rescued him, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

I'd lived with some other people, but they were mean, so I ran away. I don't remember a whole lot about those times and that's good, I think. Scavenging for food at night, people yelling and throwing things and sometimes even shooting at me.

I used to dream about those times and wake up screaming, but Daddy was always there, beside me in the bed, rubbing my head and telling me it was all right. And then it was. He was such a good daddy.

Let me start at that scene in the cage. Daddy and his Alpha Female—I won't call her my Mommy—found me in this place full of caged dogs. Even though I'd met so many bad people, I just knew he was a good one. A very good one. I wanted to join his pack and he wanted me in it. I was a very happy little girl.

But right away I saw a problem. Alpha Female wasn't a nice person. Daddy had made a mistake when he picked her out. I still don't know how people choose their mates. Just one sniff and I knew that this wasn't a good union, but people can't sniff like we can.

No, we're not better than people. Just different. You're too young to have lived with other dogs before. But some are better at running and some at seeing and some at fighting and some at smelling and some at hearing. It's the same when we live with people.

We're better at some stuff, like hearing and seeing and smelling danger. They're better at moving stuff and bringing home food and grooming us. Daddy was really good at building stuff for the home, or even whole buildings in the yard. I loved watching him work and he loved it when I watched him.

My point is, it's always best to have both dogs and people in the pack. But sometimes, I think, people don't understand what being in a pack is all about. Daddy knew. That's part of what made him special.

After a while, Daddy and Alpha Female came back with a person who

could unlock the cage, and a leash and a collar. I was a little bit scared because bad things always happened to me with those on. But I could smell Daddy telling me that all would be okay, so that helped.

Alpha Female put the leash and collar on me and I got scared. But I decided right then and there to make a statement. You know how packs are, no matter what animals are in them. You have to establish your place right away. The first impression you make on the others is everything. Then you have to follow it up every time it's challenged.

I hugged the ground and refused to move. Alpha Female was yelling at me, quiet at first and then louder. She had this voice that always hurt my ears, high-pitched and not very nice. I didn't know what she was saying. All people sounded like random noise to me then.

Like when pups are first born, like you not very long ago, they make all that noise but don't know how to talk yet. Most people are like that all the time. But not really. They have their own language. It's different from ours, but to them it's a language. But I didn't know that yet. I was just a pup myself back then.

Finally, Alpha Female gave up. She gave Daddy the leash. I sprang to my feet and ran out in front of him, tail and head held high, like I'd seen other dogs do with people. He was happy and that made me happy.

I love cars. That's a people word again. See that big shiny thing over there? They call that a truck. A car's pretty much the same, just smaller but with more room inside. Trucks are for carrying and pulling stuff.

Okay, I love cars and trucks. Going that fast without having to run is great. I can't even run as fast as cars can go. It's especially fun when the windows are down, so you can smell everything and not just see it. People don't realize that because they don't smell like we do.

I rode in Daddy's lap—he was driving—and just took in all the sights and smells. That could have been scary, all that people stuff out there, but I knew I was safe with Daddy.

It would be a long time before I learned that I could be safe without Daddy. One part of being in a pack is raising the pups so that one day, they can leave the pack and be safe on their own. Well, after Daddy raised me, I'm the one who had to chase him away. But that comes later.

We had a hard time back at his den. When I got scared, I peed right there on the floor. And whenever that happened, Alpha Female would yell at me and scare me and make me pee some more. Then she'd yell some more and I'd pee some more and... I don't want to think about it. But it was bad.

There were other problems, too. They put this bowl out on the floor and it always had food in it. But I didn't know that. I'd grab some and run off to eat it, like I used to do. I'd sleep in the day and eat at night, because that was safer before I got captured. But they didn't do that. So I had to adjust to them. I finally learned that it was okay their way. Everything was always safe now.

I knew that Alpha Female wanted me gone and that was very hard on me. But Daddy loved me and wanted me to stay. When I was with him, I just wanted to be a good girl and make him happy. And he could tell, so he was happy.

Daddy loved my smile. He'd look right in my dark brown eyes and smile back and rub my head whenever I smiled at him. Yeah, every time. And then he'd call me by the name he gave me. "Daisy." I liked how it sounded when he said it. "Daisy."

Finally, Alpha Female decided that Daddy was right and that I should stay. I was such a happy dog in those days. Until the new dog showed up.

It's not what you're thinking. They didn't have pups, like most packs do. They would just go out sometimes and bring home a new animal. They had a cat when I got there and they brought home another every so often and that was the pack.

You do know what a cat is, don't you? See that little thing over there chasing the birds? The people word for them is "cat." No, don't chase it!

You really need to listen to me. If you chase a cat, it'll just run away. That's fun sometimes, sure, but not if you're trying to make friends with it. First you make friends with them, then you can chase them all you want and you'll still be friends.

Daddy and Alpha Female had me, some cats, and some horses. Those are horses over there. Do NOT chase them. See how big they are? Never chase anything that big.

Once Daddy showed me some pigs. Sometimes he came home smelling like them, so I think he worked with them all day.

What's work? It's a people thing again. It's kind of like hunting down food, but not really. Very hard to understand. But all people do it and it's important to them. They don't lie around in the sun all day like we do. But in a pack of both people and dogs, they work so we can lie around. You'll learn that most people like feeding dogs.

Daddy loved all animals. But I was his favorite. Or so I thought, until he brought home that other dog.

One day, without any warning or anything, he walked in the door carrying this little black puppy in his arms, cradling her like a baby. She was hugging his neck and licking his face. I was a pup when he brought me home, you know. I thought I was being replaced.

That pup was Bebe, by the way. Just look at her over there, swimming in the pond again. I don't know why she loves the water so much. I don't like getting wet.

But look at her. Short hair, not long and silky and shiny like mine. She's even blacker than I am. Daddy always liked rubbing my white chest and this white paw here, but Bebe's just black. And those long ears, almost touching the ground, just hanging there, not up and over like mine. See how her body's thicker than mine, but she's got those short legs. And her eyes

look like they're going to pop right out of her head. I've seen a lot of dogs, but none that looked like her before.

So I hated that funny-looking little mutt. I had to show her right away that she was not welcome in my pack. The little mutt would eat my food. But mostly, she was stealing all Daddy's attention. I mean, this little intruder ALWAYS needed attention.

Daddy didn't like it when I got mad at Bebe. But he never wanted to drive me from the pack, though. I figured it out. Daddy and Alpha Female were away from the den a lot, leaving me alone. This little dog was supposed to be my friend while they were away.

They used to put me in a cage while they were gone. It was outside and it was bigger than the house, but it was still a cage. When they first got me, I used to get bored and tear stuff up and they didn't like that. They gave me lots of stuff that it was okay to chew on and I figured that out, but still, I had to live in my cage.

It wasn't long after Bebe showed up that she proved her usefulness. I still didn't like her, of course. She could stay, I decided, because Daddy said she could. But she would always have to know that she was Omega. Bottom of the pack. And she did. She never gave me any trouble. Probably because I was a lot bigger and older.

One day, I was in the cage, in the shelter that Daddy had put in the cage for me. Bebe was in the cage, outside the shelter, because she was Omega. She was sniffing at the metal cage, trying to dig her way out. She's got a great digging nose. But I knew it wouldn't work. I used to dig out every day, but Daddy finally fixed it so I couldn't dig my way out anymore.

Then Bebe started biting the metal. I just had to laugh at the stupid little pup. I knew that would never work. Metal is a lot harder than teeth. We all know that, don't we? Of course we do. We've all tried it.

But guess what? Bebe chewed a hole in the metal. She's a funny little dog, you know, with some weird mix in her that doesn't belong together. She leaps almost as far and runs almost as fast as I do and she's got really short legs. She sees worse than a human, but she hears better than I do. You know how good I can smell, but she's a lot better. She's got this long wiggly nose that digs hard and fast, like it was made for pulling little animals out of the ground.

And, Bebe has very hard teeth and strong jaws. I've never seen a dog eat a big bone so fast. Before the day was over, she'd chewed a big hole in the metal so we could both get out of the cage.

She really could have made the hole big enough just for her and I'd have been stuck in the cage. But she knew that we were in a pack and that I outranked her, so she had to let me out too. She's not the smartest dog I've ever met, but she did know the rules of the pack. I taught her well.

I'm a very smart dog. Did I tell you that? I'm smarter than any other dog I've ever met and most people. I think Daddy's smarter than I am, but I

don't really know. He did need my help, after all, to get rid of that wrong Alpha Female and then to leave the pack and let me be the Alpha.

Do you know about streets? About cars that go by so fast and how they'll hit you if you get in their way? I always knew that, because of my life before the pack. Bebe didn't have a clue, so I taught her real fast. Then we just played in the big yard all day and we were waiting on the porch when Daddy and Alpha Female came home.

I was a little scared, because they'd gotten mad at me before. Especially Alpha Female. If Daddy got mad, he'd tell me and I'd promise to do better and that was it. He'd let me right back into the pack like a good daddy. But Alpha Female would be mad for a long time. I'd tell her and tell her that I would do better and she wouldn't listen. I'd forget why she was mad before she'd finally stop being mad. I didn't like her. I think she knew it, even though I tried not to tell her, because that'd just make her madder.

So there I was on the porch, acting happy and smiling my winning smile but still scared. Bebe didn't have enough sense to be scared. Her "training" was much easier than mine. She's never known how rough life can be with people sometimes, but she was about to find out.

You'll never guess what happened. Alpha Female got mad at Daddy because we were loose. I don't know why being loose was a problem. Daddy always let me out loose in the yard, alone, to go mark the territory. Maybe they were afraid I'd get hit by a car, even though I always knew better than to go near them. Knowing Daddy, that was probably it.

They just took us into the den with them and everything was fine with me and Bebe. Alpha Female was mad at Daddy—she was mad at him a lot of the time. I didn't understand why he kept her around. I still don't. People can be strange sometimes.

The next day, they let us stay in the den all day. I was very happy. Soft places to lie down, cold water, no bugs in the food, the lights that aren't hot like the sun, air that's always the right temperature. I could always look out the windows, but I was always safe. And everything inside always smelled like Daddy, because that's where he lived. He was never in the cage except to fix it. I loved it in the den.

I had to teach Bebe not to chew on stuff, especially with HER teeth. Everything in the den's easier to chew than metal, so she could have destroyed anything and everything. But she learned quickly. I made sure of it. So we got to live in the den all day every day after that. It was great.

That's something people don't understand. It really doesn't matter who they're mad at. If they're mad, it smells so strong that I get upset. So if they got mad at Bebe for chewing something, I didn't like it. Or when Alpha Female was mad at Daddy. The den always smelled bad when she was in it. But like I said before, they can't smell things the way we can. And she walked too loud. Daddy was quiet when he walked, almost like a cat.

It took a long time for Daddy to get rid of Alpha Female. Really, I don't

know how much I helped him decide to do that. I just always walked up to him and told him I loved him. And he always rubbed me and called me a good girl. I hoped he'd realize that this is what an Alpha Female is supposed to do, not be mad all the time.

So finally we had a real pack. Me, Daddy and Bebe. Alpha Female even took the cats and the horses. And most of the furniture. But Daddy kept our bed. Me and Bebe always slept in the bed with Daddy. Alpha Female had her own bed and Daddy got rid of it when she left. Daddy kept our couch and something the people call a "beanbag" for us. That's all we needed. There was always too much of this "furniture" in the den before anyway.

Later, we all moved to a new den. It was smaller, but I liked it anyway. Daddy was the Alpha Male. I was the new Alpha Female. Bebe was still Omega, but she was also Beta Female. And the new den didn't smell like anybody except us. We were a very happy pack.

The old den was a long way from work, so Daddy would leave early and come home late. The new den was so close that he would leave later in the morning and come home before dark and sometimes visit in the middle of the day. Then he'd laugh at me and Bebe because we were sleeping.

It was a small den and there were no woods around it. Just the dens of other packs. We could hear people and dogs while Daddy was at work and we'd always bark at them just to let them know we were there and that they should stay away.

That was something I taught Bebe a long time ago. When she was a pup, she never wanted to bark. She'd listen to stuff and try to see it and when she could finally see it she'd puff up her long round muscular body and glare mean like I taught her. But she wouldn't bark. I had to do all the barking. Then I taught her to do it for me and I'd just chime in every now and then to let whoever it was know there was a pack here and not just a lone dog. Then they'd get the message.

It's hard to explain this next part, but I have to. This is the part where I told Daddy to leave the pack. We were the happiest pack in the world, I know. But I knew Daddy would be happier if he left and that the pack would be okay because I would make sure of it. He didn't know, so I had to tell him.

Do you know about telephones? Oh, I know you've seen them. A person holds this thing up to his ears and mouth, then talks and is quiet, talks and is quiet. I've learned that there's another person in another den somewhere, also holding a telephone and that they're talking to each other.

I told you, people talk. Those funny sounds you hear are their way of talking. Like when they always call me "Daisy." Every person has his own name and they give their dogs names too. You'll get one soon, I know. All dogs do. It just takes people a while to think of them.

With those telephones, they can even talk to people who aren't there. People are really smart with stuff like that. You know how they make lights

go on and off whenever they want. The next time one does that, look at him. He's touching something on the wall to do that.

People make stuff better than any dog ever will. It's because they've got hands—the same reason they run so slow—and also because they can talk, just like we do when we hunt or herd. I'll teach you to herd when you're a little older, just like I taught Bebe. Then we can go herd some cats.

So anyway, Daddy was talking to a new person on the telephone. I talked to this new person a few times, too. Her voice was just like Daddy's. Okay, not at all like Daddy's. But I could listen to it and not know what she was saying and just like hearing it anyway. That way, it was like Daddy's.

So Daddy found this new person, a new female, and she made him happy without ever being there. He was so happy whenever he talked to this female on the telephone.

So how did I drive Daddy away? Well, I just kept telling him that it would be okay if he went to that other female. I don't know if he understood. With most people, of course, they usually don't and you just know they don't. But with Daddy, he'd always understood everything I'd ever told him before. Just like I always understood him. He was a very special Daddy.

But this time, I didn't know. It was a very confusing time. I mean, Daddy rescued me from a little cage in a place full of dogs in little cages. I know they killed dogs there sometimes. Daddy gave me everything I could want. Food, water, a nice den and lots of love.

Even Bebe, who seemed like a curse at the time but in the end was a wonderful addition to the pack. So Daddy knew better than me that time. He did that lots of times, knowing what I wanted even when I didn't.

And now here I was, Alpha Female of our happy pack and I just knew what Daddy wanted even when he didn't. But how to tell him? Even if he was a dog, and he almost was, it'd be hard to explain. But at least I'd know he understood what I was saying. But as a person, did he? I didn't know.

One day, Daddy took me and Bebe to his daddy's house. His daddy is a big, scary man. I mean really big, like a bear. Loud and hairy like one too, but not mean. He used to yell at me when I was a pup and I'd pee on his porch because he scared me. But then he'd laugh about it. He really liked me. I could smell that.

Daddy took us to his daddy's house lots of times and that was great because he had so much room to run. I mean, lots of room to run. Probably more than you'll ever see.

This time, it was different. We followed Daddy into a room. Then he went to the door and turned to us. He told us "goodbye." Bebe probably didn't understand the word, but I did. Daddy walked out the door and closed it behind him. I knew that I would never see Daddy again.

Daddy's daddy kept us for a little while, then gave us to some other people, the ones in that house over there who come feed us. So now we live

in another nice big den, with a really big yard to run around in. It's even bigger than the one where I lived with Daddy for so long. And see the fence? That means I don't have to worry about you or Bebe running out into the street and getting hit by a car. Daddy never had a fence.

Things are a little different, because we live with people but they're not part of our pack. It's a good set-up, since they give us food and water and stuff, but it'll never be the same as being in a pack with Daddy.

I don't know where Daddy went. But I know he's with that person he met on the telephone and the computer and that he's very happy there. Knowing that makes me happy too.

So that's how I drove Daddy out of the pack and took over. What did you think, I ate him? You are one sick little puppy. I see I'm going to have my paws full teaching you how to live with this pack.

The Shortest Play

"I think I'm crazy."

"I think we all are."

"I'm not happy, but everyone else seems to be."

"Maybe they're faking it."

"Is that what you think?"

"I don't know."

"Are you faking it?"

"No. But I'm not happy."

"Am I the only one who feels this way?"

"I don't know."

"Why does it look like everyone else is doing so well?"

"I don't know."

"You're not much help."

"I didn't know I was supposed to be."

"So what do you think?"

"I think only crazy people talk to themselves."

Killing Death

Have you heard the tale of that brave warrior who, while lying on the battlefield, decided that he did not want to die?

As he felt his own hot blood trickling through his fingers, he thought it grossly unfair that his life should end. Most men die with quiet resignation, but others go down with hatred in their eyes and a curse on their lips. This brave warrior belonged to the latter breed. Have you not heard of him?

"Beyond this gate lies the end of your suffering."

"And what if I do not want it to end?"

"Then I shall wait."

Thus did Death wait patiently as our hero raised up his rifle, stabbed its bayonet into the ground, and slowly lifted himself to his feet. The eternally patient Death looked on emotionlessly.

Did you know that a human being has roughly 30 feet of intestines coiled up within his body? So it was that our hero reached into his own bowels and pulled them out. He threw them around Death's arms and bound him so that he could not escape. Then our hero picked up Death's sickle and chopped off his evil head.

If you kill a person or an animal, it dies. But if you kill Death, then all will live. Think of it: never again must the spark of a human life be extinguished. Could anything be better than that?

Even now, do you not hear the screams of the dying? The people in the cancer wards with the stench of rotting guts? The twisted figures in the burning automobiles? The lovers who leap from the cliffs and crawl back up in agony to leap again?

Do you not hear the cries of the elderly who lie paralyzed? The policeman with the bullet lodged in the grotesque remains of his skull? The deformed fetus and its dying mother? Do you not hear the screams of the man in the electric chair, or the man on the cross, or our brave hero himself?

For now that there is no Death, but only eternal life, there can be no end to their suffering. Now they crave an end to life above all else, but still it will not come.

Even now, are you not screaming with them?

The Dialogue
A Play In One Act

SCENE: JESUS and JUDAS are sitting in a sparsely furnished temple. Oil lamps hang from the walls. The setting sun is visible through a rear window. No one else is present. It is silent except for their voices.

JUDAS: Do you realize this is the first time that I've been in a temple since I fled my bar mitzvah?

JESUS: (Smiles) Why did you flee?

JUDAS: The religion just struck me as being so false. It's full of gross inconsistencies, vindictiveness and mad puritanism. Its leaders pound it into everyone's skulls until they accept it, when neither really knows just what it is they're accepting. They blindly try to follow a bunch of contradictory doctrines thrown together by a group of men who, if they were to assemble in one place, could not agree upon a single point.

There is beauty in the Testament if one knows where to look, but religion does not emphasize it. People are too busy concentrating on how they have been wronged by history. No one cares about right and wrong, or how they should live, but only what they've been bludgeoned into believing.

JESUS: This is true.

JUDAS: I'll admit that to conclude that there is no god is a far stretch, but I couldn't reason my way to one and it's just not in my nature to have faith in anything except myself.

JESUS: The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

JUDAS: No, in my case the spirit is unwilling and the flesh just doesn't give a damn.

JESUS: (Chuckles)

JUDAS: Man has a need to reason that, since his present situation is unsatisfactory, it must have been perfect at one time and that it will be so again somewhere ahead if he will but persevere. We are in a situation where we cannot be certain, but it is crucial that we come to a decision nonetheless.

We can bet that this is all there is, or that there is something beyond this. We should probably bet there is something beyond death, because if we are wrong we have only wasted some effort. But if we bet there is nothing after death and there is a judgment, we lose everything.

Or we can confess our ignorance and refuse to make a choice. One cannot pretend to accept a view that is not his, for this is mere self-deception and God would not let an individual into heaven who has done that. If there is a hell, I will be there.

JESUS: Earlier, you said the existence of evil is proof that an omnipotent, benevolent God does not exist, for He would surely destroy it?

JUDAS: Precisely. All who believe in an Almighty God are but naïve children.

JESUS: (Smiles) Including me?

JUDAS: (Grins) Almost all.

JESUS: Let's assume for a moment that there is an omnipotent, benevolent God and that He has created man's soul in His image. Would you agree that God has free will?

JUDAS: Certainly.

JESUS: And would a God who has chosen to be benevolent deprive man of that same choice? To compel a man to always do good is not the act of a truly benevolent deity. Depriving man of his free will would not be creating man in His image. He would instead be creating another element to control, just as He wills the sun to orbit the earth.

If only the good existed and not the evil, there would be no freedom. There must be more than one course of action if man is to truly have free will. What we call suffering, death, disaster, misfortune and tragedy, we should call the price of freedom. The only alternative to this suffering freedom is an un suffering unfreedom.

JUDAS: I would suggest that man has no free choice at all. He follows a given course of action because his morals or his lack of them deems that he must react to the situation presented as such. That reaction in turn conditions his mind and his perception in a given way, to in turn influence his next decision. All men's actions contribute to the circumstances of others, so that they form a web whose patterns are unalterable.

Training is all there is to a person. What we call nature is merely heredity and training. We have no thoughts or opinions of our own, only those we learn. If we judge a person by how much he has overcome his training, the value of all humanity could pass through the eye of a needle.

JESUS: Do you realize the full implications of what you are saying?

JUDAS: Indeed. Our past actions predestine our present actions. A stone that rolls down a hill believes that it's striving with all its might to stay in motion for no reason except that it wants to. Such is human freedom, in which men realize their desires but not the causes of them.

The infant believes that it freely wants milk; the angry that he freely seeks vengeance; the frightened that he freely wants to escape that which frightens him; the drunkard that he has freely chosen to do or say something only to freely choose to regret it later.

Man has no free will. Your desire to find and spread truth, Caesar's lust for power and a merchant's greed are not chosen paths, but the results of circumstances and their reactions to them. This view of causation does not assume that one's will is unable to alter the scheme of things, but rather that one's will is an integral part of that scheme. If this is true, then there is no such thing as escaping destiny.

JESUS: (Long thoughtful pause) If you say that A ought to have done X and that he is morally wrong for not doing X, then you are also saying that A, by an effort of free will, could have done X. To condemn A for doing X is meaningless if A was predestined to do Y. If A can choose between moral courses of action, then he has free will. Otherwise, to judge him is meaningless.

JUDAS: The moral "ought" is yet another mistaken belief. When faced with an apparently free choice, A could only take one course of action, depending upon what he is. For example, if A found a large sum of money and knew its owner, it would appear that he had two choices, to either keep it or to give it back.

But if he were an honest man and his honesty were stronger than his greed, then he would give it back. There would be no true choice made. His honesty and his desire to do what is right would predestine that he give it back. Likewise, if he were greedy, then he would keep the money. Period. There was no real decision involved.

His soul, be it honest or greedy, may take time to settle upon its course of action if the two feelings are similar in magnitude, or perhaps he plans to do something good with the money, or he hates the one who owns it. But he will eventually settle upon returning the money if he is honest or keeping it if he is not.

JESUS: The free choice comes in deciding whether to be honest or greedy in the first place. After he weighed the advantages and the disadvantages of honesty against those of greed, he chose to be one of the two. He could have always changed his mind, perhaps during the incident with the money, for the choice does exist. Man is always free to choose what he is and what he will become. Whether by his heart or his head, he does decide upon his actions. Man does have free will.

JUDAS: By what standards does he choose honesty or greed? Why will one man choose to place his integrity before his own gain and another man care only for himself and have no concern at all for his fellow man? Some people argue that it's inborn and others that it's learned. But one thing that both heredity and training have in common is that the individual controls neither of them.

All he encounters will affect him in some way. When he is faced with what you would call a decision and he takes the course of action that his character dictates, his action affects his character. The results of his action will either confirm the decision or change his opinion on something involved in the decision. He does not change his opinion; circumstances do. Free will is naught but an illusion.

All circumstances are causes and our characters are merely their effects. They act upon us and we react as we must. This is not the act of a deity, but merely of an immutable set of natural laws.

Circumstances alone make us what we are. What a man *is* determines what he *does*, and what he *does* determines what he *is*. We come to a point where several actions are possible, but we are capable of doing only one of them. A man can no more change what he is than a leopard can change his spots. It is foolish to wonder about the road not taken, for you could not have taken it.

The stone is given its existence and need not fight for what it is, a stone in the field. Man likes to think that he is different, but he is not. He is what he is and his past determines his future just as surely as nature determines that a rock cast from a high place will not float in the air, nor rise into the sky, but rather that it will fall to the ground.

There is no free choice in what we are. Perhaps not even sentience. Freedom of will is merely an illusion to which millennia of ignorance have given birth. Man will not believe that he is anything less than the center of the universe when he is in reality nothing but another subject to its unalterable laws. All things, even nature, must follow those laws. Nature is those laws.

I would rephrase the question of free will as, "When I have done something that I later regret, could I, by an effort of free will, have originally resisted the temptation to commit the regretted act?" I would reply that it takes no strength of will to resist temptation. It merely proves that the desire to resist is the strongest temptation.

JESUS: (Pauses reflectively) Your argument is consistent and possible. But is it correct? I truly do not know. If there is indeed a God, as I believe, perhaps He will be generous enough to reveal the truth to me before He casts me into Hell. But if there is no such God, as you believe, then no one can ever know the truth about anything.

(Pause)

JESUS: So what was Peter so mad about?

JUDAS: I stated my opinion.

JESUS: (Laughs) Ah, that explains it. But what *exactly* did you say?

JUDAS: He asked me what I thought of all this. I told him I've always known you're not the Son. I'm surprised you didn't explain that to him before.

JESUS: I was waiting for the right time. (JUDAS laughs. JESUS grins.) Peter's a good man. I knew him, along with Andrew, James and John, long before this charade started. At times, I envy his faith. He makes an excellent rock upon which to build a church. But are you sure that you don't want the job?

JUDAS: (Chuckles) I don't even believe in your God. Or had you forgotten?

JESUS: (Grins) You won't let me. What else did you tell Peter?

JUDAS: I told him that what you are doing is long overdue. You open men's minds and teach them to consider rather than accept. True, you do have to tell a little white lie so they'll listen—

(JESUS bursts into laughter. JUDAS chuckles and waits for JESUS's laughter to cease.)

JUDAS: Men have the tools to find tranquility, truth and happiness, but they won't use them. Once you give them that, nothing will be beyond them.

JESUS: I have come to kindle a fire on the earth, when I would rather that it burned already.

JUDAS: Exactly. But Peter didn't see it that way.

JESUS: He makes a point of telling me. But he has been at my side from the beginning, as the true friend that he is, and he speaks from a genuine concern rather than malice.

(JESUS pauses)

JESUS: I'm replacing one dogmatic faith with another. I tell people not to judge and yet I've judged them all to be fools needing my wisdom and guidance. I tell them to know their hearts and yet I don't even know my own. They don't look at me as just a preacher who is stating his views, but as the Son of Almighty God. The confirmation of their faith, the Creator of heaven and earth, and the man who will give them back Jerusalem. Soon we will follow in the footsteps of John the Baptist.

JUDAS: Yes, that about sums it up. I told him that most people sit around waiting for someone or something to come and answer all their questions and turn the world around. At least you are willing to do something about it. You are trying to put mankind back onto the right path, and there is no sin in that.

JESUS: I thank you, Judas. But Peter does have a point. Men would rather accept what others tell them than think for themselves. This makes our chosen mission rather difficult. They prefer to take what I say as law rather than listen to it and think about it and either accept or reject it. It is as though anyone who listens to us will unquestioningly believe everything we say.

JUDAS: I've noticed that as well. It would be terrible to think that all people are going to become pious.

JESUS: (Smiles) Yes, Judas. But I have given up everything for this cause of mine and now it appears to be all for naught. I left my home to spread the word. I left the woman I love to do this thing. I disowned my family before

the masses. Like Peter said, I have forfeited my very soul. Was it really all for naught?

JUDAS: I don't think that what you do is for nothing. Given time, we will succeed.

JESUS: Whatever I say is not thought about, but accepted as the Word of God. I am no better than the priests and the scribes. I say it and they believe it. Am I really accomplishing anything, or am I merely brainwashing them in another direction?

JUDAS: You are too hard on yourself. There are people who have heard your teachings and thought about what you are saying. There are still those who have nothing but blind faith, but you are doing enough good for enough people to make it all worthwhile. Your chosen mission is not in vain. It is for the good and your sacrifice is a most worthy one indeed.

And if there is a god, surely he agrees and thus your soul is not forfeit, as Peter would suggest. Peter is a Bible-thumper who cares more about the words than their meanings. You teach, among other things, to look beyond the mere words and to understand the ideas that lie behind them. So, while the words might dictate that what you do is blasphemous, the Lord would judge a man by his heart, and in that respect you are greater than any of us.

JESUS: (Smiles) I want to believe that, my friend, and when you say it, you make it so easy to do. But alas, I must still wonder. Are we truly reaching them?

JUDAS: It is only natural that you would question your actions, for it is that act of constantly questioning ourselves that makes us men. We are not acting as the priests and the scribes, who blindly obey what they have learned and never question what they do.

No, we are a different breed. We are thinkers. All that we do, we do because we have carefully considered it and believe that it's right. If we can teach others to live their lives in the same manner, then that alone is worth any price we pay and anything else that happens along the way matters naught.

JESUS: More food for thought, as usual. (Pause) But my will grows weak and I fear that I may not be able to keep up this pretence much longer. I fear that I may just turn my back upon it one day. I feel that I must end it.

JUDAS: What do you propose to do?

JESUS: There is only one way to end this charade without destroying all the work that I have already done. (Pause) Martyrdom.

JUDAS: (Long pause) Are you sure that you would rather not live at all than live the life you have chosen?

JESUS: Yes, Judas, I am sure. It becomes more tempting to just abandon it all and I know that I will soon give in to that temptation unless I get out now. This is the only way.

JUDAS: Do you mean to pretend to die?

JESUS: I have deceived the people long enough. My whole life has been a lie, but at least my death will not be.

JUDAS: And what do you think this decision will do to your chosen mission?

JESUS: (Smiles) You are thinking of the power that martyrs have over the living. I do not plan to truly die a martyr. I shall instead die an outcast. If I am truly the Son of God, then even death should be no obstacle to me. No, I shall promise to return in three days.

JUDAS: But you won't be able to keep that promise.

JESUS: Exactly. I leave it to you and Thomas to keep the others honest. (Smiles) Knowing John, he may have them all saying that I returned to life with a host of angels at my feet.

JUDAS: (Long pause) I hope you will change your mind. But if this is what you truly wish, then I will help you in any way that I can.

JESUS: I thank you, Judas. (Pause) What gives us the right to do this thing? You and I are sitting here, elevating ourselves high above the populace and deciding their fates for them. Why is it that we have decided we have the right?

JUDAS: Remember, rules were meant to govern fools, but only to act as guidelines for wise men.

JESUS: But which are we, Judas? Which are we?

Visit To A Madhouse

Come, my friend. Let us take a tour of the Givens Mental Institution. But first, I must warn you. It will not be a pleasant journey. We shall see human nature at its absolute ugliest. Do you feel up to it?

Ah, you do. That is good. I rarely have visitors. I must warn you not to listen to them too closely. They are intriguing, but that is the snare. It is as the sweet smell of a spider's web, drawing the fly closer only to find himself hopelessly trapped. So it is with their words.

But now you grow depressed. Lift your head and rejoice in what you will behold. You are not in any danger. I have been here a great many years and yet you see nothing unusual about my behavior.

Yes, that's better. Now let us proceed.

"Consider the scientist who objectively gathers his data. Wouldn't it be odd if he observed that two plus two equals four but didn't like it? Suppose he wanted two plus two to equal five and he wanted it so much that he refused to admit the truth, even to himself. How, then, could he hope to progress, except in ignorance? Outside the realm of science, such behavior is commonplace."

You have a question? Then by all means ask it.

Why do we let the inmates wander the halls? Do you think we should lock them away? They are not criminals. They are simply deluded. They are not violent, simply talkative.

"Death is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're going to get."

Yes, I have heard the theory that the mad can be talked out of their delusions. I have tried it—as a younger man, I tried it often. But it never worked. Now I simply keep them from hurting themselves or anyone else. It is all I can do.

"All that we are is the result of what we have thought. Excuses such as religion, race, heredity and upbringing are exactly that—excuses. What we are comes from what we think. So we should learn how to think. The wise man will neither swallow everything blindly nor rebel for the mere sake of rebellion. He will strive to discriminate, to separate the wheat from the chaff, to decide for himself. Obviously, there is a shortage of wise men."

What? They are not contagious in the sense of a virus, no. But you can become afflicted if you forget that they are mad, if you try to follow their

distorted reasoning instead of merely observing them as oddities.

"I find nothing more hypocritical than a God-fearing Christian. If you are doing His will and He loves your wretched self in return, why do you fear Him? Most Christians don't do good because they are good. They do it because they fear Hellfire. They only wish to be paid well. They're like Neanderthals adorning their graves with skulls and I hope they all rot in hell."

That's Preacher. Or so he calls himself. He spent a few years living on the streets, a bagman with a shopping cart. We don't know if he really was a preacher before he became homeless.

"We don't need knowledge. We need faith. If you don't agree with the Bible, you deserve to rot in Hell for all eternity. God doesn't want you. You get 70 years or so and pay with all eternity, which is exactly how it should be. Otherwise they'd be letting all sorts of trash into Heaven, now wouldn't they?"

Do not look at him! Let us just move on. He will stop following us after a moment.

"Did you ever quote something from the Bible? And then have somebody tell you that you're not supposed to take that so literally? They say Love thy neighbor and Thou shalt not kill but then they fight holy wars. God wrote this but meant that, blah blah blah. What, does God need an editor?!"

Oh good, he has found a more receptive audience. Now let us turn the corner before he sees us.

"Life is just a game. A pity I've lost the rules."

What? Oh no, we have never released anyone as cured. No, I take that back. One inmate insisted that he was Jesus Christ, you see, and he simply refused to believe anything else. His fellow inmates finally rewarded him for his persistence by crucifying him. We couldn't very well keep him here after that, now could we?

"Judgment is easily the worst evil of them all. Fanatics who feel that they have a great purpose, a grand and chosen mission, terrify me. They take it upon themselves to save all mankind from all its evils. But to do that, they must think that they have been saved already, that they are better than the rest of us."

Now what were we discussing? Ah yes, curing the inmates. At one

time, we had another caretaker. Oh no, I have not been here always, though it has been a good many years. But you see, he had it in his mind to cure these unfortunate souls. They would not hear him and I came here after he died.

"Science does not know. Look at how many times it changes its theories because of new facts. No, the theologians think they have all the answers and if the facts disagree, then the facts are mistaken. If the scientists ever become that self-assured, why, I'll let them lock me away!"

No doubt he thinks he is rather witty. They often do. See how he laughs? That is a symptom. He does it because he desires attention and to impress his listeners. But of course it is only an act. No man can be that happy.

"If all the world's a stage, I want to operate the trapdoor."

You have another question? Then by all means ask. Well, I was not here at the time of the original caretaker's death, but rumor has it that it was the inmates themselves who killed him. But again, that is only hearsay.

"Nothing exists. If anything does exist, we cannot know it. If we could know anything, we wouldn't be able to communicate it."

I hear the original caretaker had an only son. Again, there is a rumor, but I will tell it to you only so that you will not hear it elsewhere and mistake it for fact.

"If you don't like the answer, you shouldn't have asked the question."

This rumor, now, has it that the caretaker, who had been here long before this son's birth, made the mistake of bringing the child here and thereby contaminating him. This rumor is obviously quite absurd. An even more absurd bit of gossip claims that this was the man whom the inmates crucified.

"Lemme get this straight. God said if you sin you die, then decided it was a bad idea and killed his son so that we wouldn't have to die anymore? That's crazy!"

How many have been here before you? Oh, far too many to count. But here is an example. Now as I said, so very few become inmates, but nonetheless, all whom you see here now became afflicted after a tour. Of course the original inmates have all long since died.

"If I tell you that I can throw an apple into orbit around the earth, you'll laugh. Why? Because you know it's absurd. But if I tell you that there is or is not a God, you won't laugh. You'll argue rather adamantly. Is that because you aren't as sure of your footing?"

We began releasing inmates a few years ago. People aren't being cured, but they're going insane all the time. If we release an inmate who is only a little insane, we can let another in who is very insane. Thus we do the most good with what we have.

"If mankind has free will, then why can't I quit smoking?"

Yes, I have often tried to close the doors to these tourists forever. Many tourists have felt that we should stop giving tours. Even some of the inmates shout that they wish no more tourists. But it seems that the petitions are lost somewhere in the hierarchy. It is so complicated that even I do not know who I serve.

"If a person hasn't found something that he is willing to die for, then he probably has no reason to live anyway."

I do not like that fanatical gleam in your eyes. Come, let us leave this place at once! Yes, I know that you wish to stay, but can't you see that this is a symptom? Even now you are going mad and to stay another minute means that you will stay forever. Come, let us leave!

"If there is life after death, why can't there be life before birth?"

There now, that is better. You almost went mad, but you are fully sane again. Now then, do you have any questions before you depart? You do? Then by all means ask.

You ask who among us belongs in the Givens Mental Institution? You should ask who among us does not.

A Modern Epic

When Nathaniel Brown awoke, he wanted to scream. He felt the burning pain of the bullet, as if it were striking him now instead of at some point in the past, but he could not scream. His body would not cooperate.

Brown was cold, but he thought that it was summer. He tried to remember the battle. Yes, he was sure that it was summer. Why, then, was he so cold?

Gradually, he forced his eyes to open. He looked down at his body. There was a bullet hole in his chest. There was very little blood on his faded Army jacket. He wondered if perhaps the bullet had punctured a lung.

As his mind struggled to clear, he became aware of a terrible noise, somewhere between a wheeze and a rattle. He realized that it was his own labored breathing. Yes, he concluded, the bullet definitely punctured a lung. Unless someone arrived soon, he would face a painful but bloodless death.

He struggled to lift his head, to see if there was someone he could call out to. If someone were there, that person might not realize that he was alive.

He was surrounded by corpses, by bodies and pieces of bodies. Some were wearing the green fatigues of the Allied Army, others the gray of Nazi soldiers. Lying there in the charred remains of the small French village, they all seemed the same.

Brown was startled by a noise. He thought it was coming from somewhere in front of him, which was good because he was too weak to turn. Yes, he decided, someone's coming. He listened to the crackling of twigs on the ground as someone walked toward him.

After a minute, Brown saw that the stranger had the erect bearing of a soldier. He strained to see the man's uniform, to determine which side he was on.

The sight of a stranger in black, out here on a battlefield so far from home, sent a chill up his spine. Black was the color of the Nazi's infamous SS Troops. But why, he wondered, would a lone SS Trooper be here?

Brown looked harder. Yes, the stranger was wearing black. But no, it wasn't a uniform. It was a shawl, wrapped around the tattered and bloody remains of a uniform. Brown could not make out the color of the uniform. The shawl also concealed the stranger's face.

Brown made a half-hearted attempt to get up from the ground, but his body still would not cooperate. He could only hope this was a friend. If it was an enemy, there was nothing Brown could do except wait for him. If it was not a friend, Brown was sure, he would be dead soon anyway.

Brown tried to call out, but he couldn't find the air. He thought surely the stranger would hear the breathing that was ringing out in his own ears.

But the stranger gave no indication that he was aware of Brown's presence.

"Hello," Brown managed to gasp weakly. He tried again to suck in some air and his voice was firmer as he repeated his greeting. "Hello."

The stranger did not reply.

"I'm over here." Brown coughed. "Can you hear me?"

The stranger wordlessly walked to Brown and stopped before him.

"Who are you?" Brown asked.

"A friend." The stranger offered his hand. "Come."

"Who are you?!" Brown repeated, in a fair approximation of a scream.

"I have come to take you to a peaceful place."

Brown grabbed at the shawl and snatched it away. Then he saw that the face of Death was his own.

"No!" he screamed. "No!"

§

Brown awoke shivering in his bed. His sheets were soaked with sweat. His mind was filled with images of his recurring nightmare vision. He lay back down and tried to control his breathing.

A noise from another room fell upon his ears. He silently arose from his bed, his mind alert for any sound as he moved to his dresser. Opening the top drawer, he pulled out a Luger and cocked back the hammer.

He heard the front door slam and he cautiously peered out the bedroom door. In the dim light of the fading moon, he could barely make out the figure of a man. The intruder took a shaky step forward and then fell to the floor.

Brown cautiously entered the living room and turned on a lamp. The intruder on the floor was a young boy, perhaps a teenager, dressed in jeans and a light denim jacket. He was tall and thin, with close-cropped dirty blond hair and an angular face and dark rings under his closed eyes. On his back was a growing red splotch. He was bleeding to death.

Indecision filled Brown. He did not want to see an innocent man die, but he did not want to die himself. He wrestled with his conscience a moment before deciding to take the risk.

Brown slipped the gun into the back of his waistband and knelt down beside the kid. He was no doctor, but he'd had some first aid training. He was able to lift the bottom of the jacket without moving the kid and to determine that the injury was only a knife wound in the back. Painful, but not fatal if treated properly.

So why, Brown wondered, had this kid passed out? Later, as he was gently turning the kid over to tape a bandage around him, he smelled the alcohol on his breath.

"I risked my life for this? No, it's best not to judge. Maybe there's more to this kid's story than meets the eye."

§

The munitions dump exploded in a flash of light. A cloud of thick black smoke rose into the sky as the forest crackled and burned. Another explosion hurled lifeless bodies through the air. Brown almost felt that he could hear the screams of the dying.

Brown gazed at the destruction and waited for the fires to burn down. Then he crept through the brush to examine the wreckage. Seeing no signs of movement, he rose to his feet and walked. He held his gun poised and ready.

The crackle of machine gun fire whizzed by his ear and he turned to see a German soldier lying on the trail. The Nazi's body was ripped open and his guts were splattered about. Brown sprayed the dying atrocity with machine gun fire and its arm slumped to the ground.

Brown paused a moment to shake off the vision before moving on. He wiped the sweat from his face. Then he saw that his hand was covered with his own blood.

"Nathaniel," a voice behind him said gently.

Brown spun around to see the cowled soldier. He opened fire on the apparition. He fled backward in terror, throwing all caution aside and firing his gun until it was empty. The soldier continued slowly walking toward him.

Dropping his weapon, Brown fled from the evil being. Thorns stung his face but he continued running. Fleeing faster, he tripped on a vine and fell to the ground.

"Come. It is better on the other side."

"Leave me! I do not want to die!"

"Take it easy," said another voice.

Brown opened his eyes. He was not in the woods, racing away from Death. He was lying on his couch. The boy he had saved from Death was at his side. He was maybe 20 years old. Brown could scarcely remember having been so young himself.

"Are you all right?" the kid asked.

"Yeah."

"Thanks for what you did. Are you a doctor or something?"

"No."

"Oh, here's your gun. Were you in World War I?"

Brown accepted the Luger. "Now I know I don't look that old."

"Thanks for staying up with me too, man."

"I wanted to make sure you didn't steal anything."

"Sure, man. Got any food in here?"

Brown glanced at his watch. "There should be some groceries on the porch."

"Huh?"

"I get them delivered every few days. Go check the porch."

Recognition dawned on the youth. "Oh yeah. You're Old Man Brown, aren't you?"

"They call me that?"

"They say you're crazy and that you won't let anyone in because you hate everybody."

"Then why are you here?"

"Well...."

"You were running. There was a knife wound in your back."

"Are you gonna call the cops?"

"No."

The kid opened the front door and brought in two paper bags. "I don't guess you've got any beer in here."

"No. What's your name?"

The kid thought a moment. Brown was finally able to see his eyes. A pale shade of brown, with little gold flecks. They darted from place to place, never meeting Brown's gaze firmly. He decided that he didn't like this kid.

"Dennis," the boy finally answered.

"I'm Nathaniel. Nice to meet you."

"Yeah."

"So how did you get stabbed?"

"It's none of your business!" Dennis shouted, then turned away from the old man and moved toward the kitchen.

"I could call the cops."

Dennis whirled to face Brown. "Don't do that."

"Or I could just shoot you," Brown added, cocking the hammer on the Luger.

After glaring at the old man for a long moment, the kid clamped down on his temper. "Fuck it. You do what you want. I'm going to cook some breakfast."

As Brown watched the kid carry the bags into the kitchen, he wondered just what in the hell he had let into his house. He sat on his couch, the gun still in his hand, and watched the kitchen. Finally, Dennis returned with two plates of food.

"Sorry about the rug," Dennis said as he entered.

Brown simply stared.

"I'm sorry about getting mad, too. I've got a bad temper sometimes."

"Is that how you got stabbed?"

"Yeah. Here, man, have some food."

"I'm not hungry."

"It's not poisoned. If I was gonna bump you off, I'd have done it when you were sleeping. I gave you back your fucking gun. Remember?"

After a moment, Brown set the gun down on a nearby end table and accepted the food. "Thanks."

Dennis sat down in a recliner and began eating. Brown watched him for a moment, then began eating the simple meal of scrambled eggs and bacon.

"I'm not much of a cook," Dennis admitted, in response to Brown's expression. "I wonder what's on the TV."

"What, are you moving in?"

"No. Where's your TV, man?"

"I don't have one."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Don't you think there was life before TV?"

"Sure. But it was boring. I mean, what did you do for fun?"

"What do you think we did?"

Dennis thought a moment. "My mom's got seven brothers and sisters," he said finally.

"We couldn't do that until we learned what it was."

"Because you couldn't watch it on TV."

"Right. We worked, read, listened to the radio, danced sometimes, left the damn house once in a while and enjoyed being outdoors. But mostly, we just talked. We could sit around and fill hours that way. People don't talk to each other anymore."

"So what do you do for fun? I mean, you never leave the house and no one comes in, so that leaves out talking and sex. And no beer. You don't have any drugs, do you?"

"Hell no!"

"Take it easy, man. I was just wondering what you do for fun."

"I remember. Sometimes people need to slow down, to just sit back and think about things."

"You got a radio?"

"Over the fireplace."

Dennis walked over to it and switched it on. "This is an old one, isn't it?"

"My father gave it to me before I went to France. I remember sneaking it into the barracks and listening to it after hours every night. One night my sergeant finally caught us. He agreed not to report it if we'd stop using it after hours and if he could join us to hear Amos and Andy."

When the vacuum tubes had warmed up, the radio started playing "That's The Way Love Is" by Bobby Darrin. Dennis started to get up and change the station. Then he noticed the faraway look in Brown's eyes.

The music seemed to bring back some memories for the old man. He looked sad, but he started to smile. The kid quietly walked back to the old leather recliner.

Brown awoke sitting in his chair. He looked at his wife. She was lying on a hospital bed. Her cold hand was still tightly wrapped in Brown's strong hands. Her face was twisted into its familiar grimace, the paralysis having frozen it in that position.

Brown's tired eyes moved across the assorted tubes that kept his wife alive. Polio had stricken her down in the prime of her life. She received all her food intravenously because she was too weak to eat.

The doctors had urged Brown to leave, but he couldn't abandon her in her hour of need. He wanted to reassure what little remained of her. The doctors would find a cure. He had to believe that. Maybe, if he stayed at her side, she would find the strength to hang on until they did.

Her pale, seemingly lifeless eyes gazed in the same direction, unseeing. But he knew that somewhere, deep within the frail body, his beloved wife still lived and that she saw him beside her.

Brown's eyes filled with horror. The tube in her neck had slipped loose! He desperately paged the nurse, then frantically checked his wife's wrist for a pulse. He put his ear to her chest and heard nothing. She had died while he slept. If he had been awake, she would have lived.

Brown's will collapsed. He buried his face in his hands and sobbed bitterly. The only thing left for him to live for, his only source of joy or purpose, was gone forever.

§

"Nathaniel Hawthorne Brown."

"Huh?"

The kid glanced at the old man to see that he had awakened. "I was just looking at this medal. Awarded to Nathaniel Hawthorne Brown, for conspicuous heroism above and beyond the call of duty. So what did you do to get this?"

"I killed three Nazis while they slept. Does that sound heroic to you?"

"I'll bet you were quite a fighter back then."

Brown did not reply.

"So what happened to you? I mean, why are you living like this?"

"I got wiser in my old age."

"It sounds like you're afraid."

"At least I don't go hiding in strangers' houses."

"You're afraid to die, aren't you? That's why you live like this. You're afraid to die."

"Nobody wants to die."

"No, it goes deeper than that. You've seen Death and now that you're old, you're afraid you'll see it again."

"You don't understand."

Dennis was silent a moment. "You have seen Death, haven't you?"

"Yes, I've seen him. Many times. I've sent men into his black embrace and I've been mere inches away from that embrace myself. We know each other well."

"Why do you fight it so much?"

Brown rose to his feet and faced the lad angrily. "Death is evil! I do not fear Death. I despise him."

"Is there only one Death doing all the killing? I'd think he'd have his hands full with a stubborn old geezer like you."

"No, there's not one Death. Death comes from Satan and he uses the souls of the damned to claim the old and the sick and the weak."

"You're nuts. When you die, you rot. You don't get one throw of the dice and then pay with all eternity. That's stupid. When you die, that's it."

"Then how'd we get here?"

"I didn't study physics, but it happened somehow because here we are."

Brown sat back down in his chair and sighed. "That's brilliant. Don't you even care?"

"No, I don't. You old farts are all alike, sitting on your asses asking dumb questions nobody can answer instead of going out and living."

"That's better than you young yahoos who don't know how to think anymore. Are you that stupid, or are you just too damn lazy?"

"Don't talk to me like that."

"People like you are destroying this great nation—"

"That you fought and died to defend. I've heard it before, old man."

"You act like the world owes you a living. We busted our tails for you, gave you everything we could—"

"—and this is the thanks you get. I've heard that too, old man. But you don't even know what living means because you're too busy hiding."

"I'm not hiding!"

"Then what are you doing?"

Brown's voice grew quiet. "Death had me down twice. Both times, he asked me to take his hand. But I didn't. It's been a long time, but he'll be back soon. I know that. He knows that I won't take his hand. So he'll try to trick me somehow. Maybe he'll change his looks. But if I stay here and then someone comes in, I'll know it's probably him. If I never touch him, I can live forever."

"You're sick."

"I knew you couldn't understand. You're just a young punk."

"I don't like that word. I'm a man, not a punk."

"Is that supposed to scare me? I've beaten punks like you—"

"But now you're old."

"I'll never be that old, punk."

Dennis turned away. Brown reached out and grabbed his arm. Dennis spun around with a switchblade in his hand.

"Don't grab me, man."

Brown took a step backward. "Hey, put the knife away."

"Are you scared? I thought you were gonna live forever."

"There's no reason for this."

"You get on my nerves."

"You would kill me for getting on your nerves? After I saved your life?"

"Yeah, I would. Nobody does nothing for nobody unless they want something!"

"What do you have that I could possibly want?"

"You want to preach to me, old man, and I don't need your damn preaching. When I first came in here, you were afraid I might be Death. Let's just say you were right."

Brown reached for his gun, but the boy was quicker. He thrust his knife at the old man's stomach. Brown skipped back to dodge the weapon. Dennis thrust it at him again. Brown caught his wrist and twisted his arm behind his back. He turned the boy's wrist so that he could feel the knife blade pricking against his skin.

"I could kill you right now," Brown stated.

"Then why don't you?"

Brown applied more pressure to his shoulder, forcing him to finally drop the knife. Then he released the boy and pushed him away.

"I think you'd better leave. But first, some advice. A lesser man would have—"

Dennis kicked Brown in the groin. The old man doubled over in pain. Dennis pushed him away, picked up the knife and thrust it into his chest.

Brown gasped in pain, but then his jaw stiffened as he stood firm and proud. Pulling the weapon from his chest, he offered it to the boy.

"And still I live," Brown said quietly. "Here, take this and leave. You can use the sink to clean off the blood."

Dennis reached out to accept the weapon. At first he was stunned, but then he chuckled. "Oh, I'll leave eventually. But first I'll look around and see what's worth taking. And you'll leave too, old man, but it'll be in a pine box."

Brown took a step toward the boy, but he suddenly stopped and coughed up blood.

"You're a fool, old man. That's why I survive—I kill old fools."

Brown's strength of will failed him and he slumped to the floor.

§

Brown opened his eyes to see a tall figure standing before him. Oddly, he felt no pain from his injury, only a vague recollection that it had pained him before.

"Kid?"

"I am not young."

Brown jerked to his feet. He was not in his living room. Rather, he stood on a bridge. Behind him was a vast green landscape. Before him was only mist. He looked down, but there was no water, only an endless fog. He turned back to the figure beside him. Its face was concealed beneath a cloak.

The mist before him cleared to reveal a hospital bed. In the bed was a clock and around the bed hovered other clocks. Each clock was unique and their hands moved at varying speeds. Moments later, a clock appeared that Brown somehow knew represented himself.

The entire vision moved at this rapid pace. There was no real action or meaning to it all, only congregations of clocks. The only sound that Brown heard was the combined ticking of them all.

Time spent learning at home, or at school under the guidance of an antique grandfather clock. Time spent laboring and resting, laughing and crying, thinking and feeling, seeking and finding, loving and hating. The whole of his life was replayed in the mist, but in the vision all was time, only time. Time wasted and time well spent—the vision made no distinction. Through it all, time continued to move forward, ever forward.

The final scene was also in a hospital bed. The clock that was himself lay there and two other clocks stood nearby. His alarm rang out sharply, the ticking ceased and the scene faded to black. As the mist swirled to become mist once more, Brown turned to see that Death wore the face of the clock that was himself.

DESCENT INTO MADNESS

Chapter One

Wouldn't life be simpler if the dead just stayed dead?

Bert got home from work around ten o'clock. When he entered the house, he was greeted by the smell of food. He was surprised to see his wife sitting on the couch.

"Supper's in the oven," she said sweetly. "Busy day?"

Bert was surprised by Wendy's civility. "Yeah." He walked into his office, set down his briefcase and returned to the living room.

Bert had a face that people wanted to trust. His eyes were a darker shade of blue than those of his wife. He wore his copper-brown hair short because it was hopelessly curly. He looked a few years older than his wife and he was a few years older than he looked.

Throughout his youth, Bert was the one that most turned away from at first sight. The others told him that he was ugly first. But the myriad wrinkles of adulthood had changed all that, he hoped, leaving him almost handsome.

"Everybody just seemed to run long today," he said. "Then when I was about to leave the office, the police asked me to squeeze in an evaluation of a suspect."

"Of course you did."

"Yeah. Sorry I didn't call you, but I did it at the police station instead of the office and it's hard to get to a phone there sometimes. I tried to call you on the cell phone, but the battery died."

"I thought maybe you didn't call because... because the whore didn't have a phone in her motel room."

"Wendy—"

"That's right, you don't fuck whores, you fuck your patients. Do you charge the full hundred an hour or do you give them a discount?"

Bert walked into the kitchen.

"I don't suppose you're good enough to charge them more than your usual rate," she said as she followed him.

Bert opened the refrigerator and reached for a beer.

"Just tell me it was a woman and not some guy's ass."

Bert took a long swallow of his beer.

"That's it. Drink up. Be a damn drunk like the rest of your family."

"You want the truth? After I finished at the police station, I went back to the office to catch up on some paperwork because I figured if I worked late enough, I could come home just once this week without you jumping all over my ass when I hit the door."

"Fine, then. Just get away from me."

Wendy went back into the living room. Bert wondered why she was so good at pushing the right buttons. He quickly finished his beer, got another and went to the living room.

"I made you a doctor's appointment today," he said, trying to sound casual.

"What for?"

"The headaches."

"It's just stress. They'll go away once the baby's born."

"I think you should go. Just to be safe."

"We can't afford to go to a doctor every time I get a headache."

"God knows that's the truth."

"If you want it every night, just go fuck a whore!"

"I'm sorry." *Why did I let my anger get in the way again?* "I know you're pregnant, but I still think you're getting tired more than you should. I know your hormones are out of whack, but I still think your mood swings are worse than they should be. And I worry about how long your headaches last."

"I'm not having mood swings."

"And your memory."

"My memory's fine. All a doctor's good for is sticking an IV into your bank account and draining... draining...."

"Wendy?"

"Draining the bank account for all it's worth."

"That's it. We're going to the hospital now."

"Bert—"

"Bitch all you want, just do it in the car."

The way Wendy's anger suddenly vanished was not only atypical, but it was unnatural. Bert rushed Wendy to the car before her rage returned, knowing full well he should have done this sooner. Much sooner.

"You're overreacting," Wendy said as Bert backed the car out of the driveway, but there was no conviction in her tone.

"Maybe *my* hormones are out of whack today."

Bert didn't stop at the stop sign. He cut in front of oncoming traffic, narrowly missing an approaching car, and swung into the turn-only lane in the center. He flipped on the emergency blinkers, held down the horn and floored the gas pedal.

Wendy screamed, an awful sound that seemed to reverberate on the closed car windows and attack Bert's ears.

"I didn't hit anybody," he muttered. Wendy was always nagging him about his driving. Bert swung to his right, cutting off the traffic behind him, and ran a light that had just turned red.

Wendy screamed again, clutching at her head, agony in her tear-stained eyes. Bert floored the accelerator and raced for the hospital. He tried

not to think that Wendy had screamed like a dying woman, but that was exactly what she had done.

Wendy stopped screaming. Her stance in her seat seemed skewed somehow. Bert saw that the left side of her body was paralyzed. Her face hadn't changed from its twisted grimace and her mouth was open in a silent scream.

Bert didn't care about the siren that pierced the air and the flashing blue-and-red lights in his rearview mirror. His wife was dying!

The squad car drove alongside Bert's car. The cop, a woman, recognized Bert. When she saw Wendy, she passed him and left her lights and siren going, to provide police escort.

"Just let me get you to the hospital," Bert told Wendy. "You'll be all right once I get you to the hospital."

Bert was wrong. He knew he was lying when he said those words, to her and to himself. In the course of the next few weeks, he had no choice but to face the truth.

§

Bert was sitting in the hospital waiting room, facing the floor, holding a cold cup of coffee that was still full. A set of legs, clad in the dark blue of a police uniform, stopped in front of him. Bert looked up to see that it was the same cop who had escorted him to the hospital when Wendy had her seizure.

"Hi, Chris. What brings you down here?"

Officer Chris Moreno sat in the chair beside Bert. "We can talk about that later," she answered. "How's Wendy?"

"No change. The tumor's still growing. With intense treatment, she might come out of her coma. She could live for months, maybe even a year or two. But she'll never recover from the paralysis. She'll never be able to think, speak, or recognize her family."

"Or?" Chris prompted.

"You don't miss much, do you?"

"It's part of the job description."

"The doctor could remove enough of the tumor to confirm his diagnosis, then sew her back together. Untreated, it'll kill her within days. At most, a few weeks."

"What about the baby?"

"She lost him. We would've had a son."

Chris laid an arm around Bert's shoulders. Soft and beautiful like everything about her. The simple gesture reassured him more than words ever could. Finally, she spoke.

"You feel guilty telling the doctor to end her life because you think, deep down, you might've secretly wished for it a time or two."

"Who's the shrink here?" He chuckled dryly. "Wendy doesn't believe in euthanasia. She'd want to hang onto any sorry excuse for life as long as possible."

"Do you think she's still alive in there?"

"No."

Chris took her arm from around Bert. "I don't know if you ever met my husband, Caleb."

"No."

"He was a cop, too. Department rules mean we work different shifts. I'd just gotten home from work when they called me. Caleb was shot pursuing a suspect. I just gave the order to donate his organs."

"Chris, I'm so sorry." He wanted to reach out, find some reassuring gesture, but he didn't know what, so he just sat there feeling awkward.

"I'm okay. Caleb was shot in the head, where the vest didn't protect him. The rest of his body was fine, everything except his brain, so it was only common sense to donate his organs. Even though he said he never wanted that."

"You're right." Bert stood up. "I should talk to the doctor. Thanks."

§

Bert gazed at Wendy's closed eyes. He held one of her tiny hands in his and noticed how cold it was. Behind him stood the doctor and the nurse who would disconnect the vast array of machinery that all but surrounded them.

"This isn't her," Bert said to no one. "This is only an empty shell."

Bert squeezed Wendy's hand. There was no response. He leaned over her and whispered, "I love you," into her ear. He rose to his feet, released her hand and stepped aside. There was no change, no sign that she was anything more than a rock or a piece of furniture.

The doctor was waiting patiently when Bert turned to him. Bert nodded. The doctor smiled weakly, sympathetically. Bert felt vaguely like an intruder.

The doctor signaled the nurse to switch off the respirator. The nurse complied and Wendy's chest collapsed. The doctor reached for the tube that entered Wendy's nose and led to her lungs. He wiped it with a cloth as he pulled it out—pull, wipe, pull, wipe, pull, wipe—then handed it to the nurse.

The EKG and EEG alarms beeped loudly. Wendy's eyes opened and she bolted upright in the bed. The stunned doctor quickly stepped away.

"Bert?"

"Wendy?!"

"Bert!"

"My God!"

Bert ran to her. They embraced. She was alive! It was a miracle!

Or was it?

DESCENT INTO MADNESS

Chapter Two

"Why are you leaving so early?"

To slip out before your sorry ass wakes up and bitches at me again.

Bert turned to Wendy, briefcase in hand, and set down his coffee cup. Ignoring the smoldering rage that was always in her eyes, he laid a hand on her shoulder and kissed her briefly on the lips.

"Honey, you're awake."

"Yeah. You were banging all around in the kitchen."

"I'm sorry, I was just doing the dishes."

"I was going to get them."

Bert smiled. "I know. I just wanted to help."

"Because I don't do enough around here?"

"No, just because I love you."

"Yeah, right."

Bert ignored her skepticism. He would simply pretend they were a happy couple and hope it happened one day.

"How do you feel?" he asked. "Did you sleep well?"

"I feel like I just lost a baby and a brain tumor and I couldn't sleep worth a damn."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, everybody's sorry."

"I was just going to get an early start on some paperwork. I've gotta testify for the police this morning and my notes are still on the tape recorder. I'll probably get home late, too. The afternoon is booked solid and —"

"You love your work."

"Yeah, if I could just decide what I want to be when I grow up."

"What do you mean by that?"

Bert chuckled. "Do I want to help the mentally ill cure themselves or do I want to help the police get the bad guys off the street?"

"The only reason you treat the mentally ill is so you don't have to admit you're one of them."

Bert laughed. "I thought it was for the money. I've gotta run. I love you."

"Yeah."

It didn't bother Bert that Wendy didn't reply to his "I love you" with one of her own. In ten years of marriage, she never had.

Bert was sitting at his desk, typing a few handwritten notes into his laptop computer. A knock at the door made him look up. He was surprised to see Chris Moreno, the cop from the hospital.

"Busy?" she asked.

"No," he lied. "Come on in."

Chris entered the room and, like most visitors, stopped to look at the couch. "So this is it."

Smiling, Bert got up from his desk and walked around to the 'counseling' area of his large office. It was decorated in soothing shades of brown and matching earth tones, designed to look professional while putting his patients at ease. "Yes, this is it. So what brings you down here?"

"I just wanted to tell you that you were great at the trial today. The jury rejected the insanity defense and found him guilty of all charges."

"Good."

There was an awkward pause in the conversation. Noticing how close she was standing to Bert, Chris stepped away.

"And?" he prompted after a moment.

"Since Caleb died—"

Bert stepped toward her and laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"The captain keeps telling me to take some time off, but I'm afraid if I just sit in the house I'll go nuts."

"That's perfectly normal. But there are ways to keep busy outside of work."

"Such as?"

"Going to school, visiting friends and family, a sex change operation—"

"What?!"

"Just wanted to see if you were paying attention." Bert took his hand from her shoulder. "Have you talked to the department psychiatrist about this?"

"No. My captain keeps telling me to, but I don't know. I just don't feel comfortable talking to a shrink. A stranger, I mean."

"Sometimes a stranger is better."

"Can I talk to you? That's why I really came down here."

"Well—"

"Unless you've got an appointment or something. This is stupid. I should've called first."

"No, that's fine. Just give me a minute, okay?"

Bert walked over to his desk and pressed a button on his telephone. "Gabrielle, hold all my calls. I can't be disturbed. And reschedule the Dawson appointment. Tell her an emergency's come up and give her any time slot she wants."

"I can come back—" Chris began.

"No, stay. She's just some old rich bitty who spends the whole damn hour telling me about her Siamese cat. I wasn't looking forward to it today

anyway. Have a seat."

Chris turned to the counseling area. It contained three leather chairs, a larger one facing the other two, and a leather couch. She sat on the couch facing the large chair, which was obviously Bert's. He sat in the chair.

"The other chairs are too far away," she said.

"I know." He grinned, a well-rehearsed gesture. "It's deliberate."

"So you think I should take some time off work and find something else to occupy my mind."

"Is that what you think?"

"Don't turn into a shrink on me now, Bert."

"Okay." He looked squarely into her eyes. "For most people, the job would be a great place to hide. But you don't have that luxury, because your husband was also a cop and if you're not 100% out there it could get you killed."

"I'm fine—"

"If you were fine, you wouldn't be here."

"You're right," she admitted, averting her gaze.

Bert reached out and took her hands in his. Their warmth surprised him. "What we need to do, then, is figure out what you can do with your time. Lying around the house isn't your style and your mind wouldn't have anything to do but dwell on the past. Not that thinking about him is bad. That's how he lives on, in your memory. But what do you like to do?"

Chris looked up into Bert's eyes. They had a caring quality that she never saw in a man. Hell, she thought, she rarely saw it in a woman. *Give me your problems*, they seemed to say. *I'll help you carry them*.

Chris rambled on about gardening, bicycling, working out and she wasn't sure what else. She was trying to hide her guilt. *He's my psychiatrist, I don't know him very well, and my husband's body isn't even cold yet*.

Bert, meanwhile, was haunted by his own demons. For years, Wendy had accused him of the unthinkable, seducing a patient on the psychiatric couch. But on this particular day, he'd decided to do exactly that.

"These are all solitary pursuits," he stated. "That's a problem. You'll be camping or hiking or whatever, dwelling on Caleb's memory. We need to find you something that involves interaction with another person."

"Such as?"

Bert and Chris stared squarely into each other's eyes, as if they were looking for something missing in their own lives. They were still holding hands and their grips tightened.

"This is wrong," he said.

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"Do we care?"

"No."

Chris pulled Bert to her and their lips met in a desperate kiss. Filled

with a need he'd never seen in his wife, Bert thought, then pushed away all thoughts of Wendy. Chris opened Bert's tie and unbuttoned his shirt. Bert reached up with one hand to fondle a breast as he slid the other between Chris's legs.

Breathless, they finally pulled away from each other. Gazing deep into Chris's eyes, Bert unbuttoned her blouse and then her bra.

"I always wondered what you'd look like out of uniform," he mumbled.

§

Bert opened the door of his house to see his wife straddling a naked man. Her eyes were closed and her expression was one of ecstasy. Her breasts swayed with the rhythm of energetic lovemaking. The man's tan skin was taut around his small muscles. His back was bloody where Wendy had scratched him.

Bert kicked the man just below his ribs. The man rolled off Wendy and scrambled to his feet. Bert couldn't turn away from the naked, sweating figure of his wife.

"Hey man, I'm sorry, I didn't know—" the stranger began.

"Get out."

"She's not wearing a ring—"

"Get out now."

The man scrambled to pick up the clothes that were scattered about the floor.

"I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"Shut up and get the hell out."

The man rushed out carrying his clothes and slammed the door behind him.

Wendy got to her feet and took a step toward Bert. A wave of emotion rose up within him, something terrible in its awesome power. He struck his wife across the face with the back of his hand. Her head and body spun around from the impact and she landed on the floor face down. Bert towered over her and struggled against the urge to kick her.

"Why couldn't you just stay dead?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. Naked and sobbing, she got to her feet. Bert's rage threatened to consume him.

As a psychologist, Bert had encountered battered women. Deep down, he had judged them for it and found them wanting. He'd always believed that he would never force Wendy to become a victim, that she would never allow herself to become a victim. But he was wrong. He was exhilarated at his own power, but he despised her for giving him that power.

He raised his hand to strike her again. He wanted her to back away or duck. He wanted her to block it. He wanted her to kick his knee or his groin. But no, she just stood there, waiting for him to strike again.

His rage gave way to disgust. He left her that way.

Bert drove until he saw a convenience store and stopped on a whim to buy some beer. He'd never "brown-bagged" before, but right then it seemed like a good idea.

Bert was getting back into his car when he saw his briefcase on the passenger seat. Out of habit, he'd picked it up on his way out. He opened it and saw some atheist literature. They were having a convention down in Fort Lauderdale. If he hurried he could make it.

"It's almost like a sign from God."

Or maybe someone else.

Bert started the car and drove toward Fort Lauderdale, drinking his beer and trying not to look at himself in the rearview mirror.

"You always wondered what a wife beater looks like. Now you know. He looks like that bastard in the mirror."

§

Bert was driving north on a deserted stretch of 821, perhaps a bit too tired to be driving, when he swerved onto the shoulder. A man who had run out of gas was walking along the highway, at night, when Bert's car hit him. The man's body doubled over backwards at the waist. His spine was broken. He sailed belly first, twisted at an impossible angle, and landed in the ditch beyond the shoulder of the highway.

Kissing his ass goodbye, Bert thought.

The sound of the car striking the stranger startled Bert to awareness. He didn't see most of the body's acrobatics, only the expression on the man's face when his car hit him. It was a face that Bert would never forget.

The highway was dark, as it was late and there were no streetlights. There were other cars on the highway, but no one was close enough to be called a witness. Regardless, a good man would have stopped. A good man would have checked to see if the pedestrian needed help, or if he was still alive. A good man would have taken responsibility for his mistake and faced the consequences.

Bert had quit believing in good men a long time ago. He changed the station on the car radio and kept driving as if nothing had happened.

§

Wendy Himes stood in the middle of her dining room, frozen like a deer in the headlights, as the man she'd once loved raised his hand to strike her. The scene replayed itself in her mind over and over again. In that moment, she saw that which she hated about herself the most. She hadn't fought and she hadn't run. She'd simply frozen.

Wendy was sitting on her love seat. No, she corrected herself. She was

sitting on Bert's love seat. In Bert's living room. In Bert's house. She'd been content to sit naked for a long time before finally putting on a robe that Bert had bought for her.

Love seat? The love left this house a long time ago.

Somewhere along the line, she'd given up her dreams. She'd settled for simply being married to the right man, to being one more trophy on his mantel. She didn't know when or where or how that had happened, only that it had.

Thank God I lost the baby. That would have been the final nail in the coffin, the final brick in the wall that keeps me locked away in this place.

Perhaps she should have thanked someone else.

Bert had a shotgun—*God knows why with a wimp like him*—on the top shelf of the bedroom closet. Wendy calmly got a chair, climbed atop it and removed the shotgun from its place. She loaded it with five shells—all it would hold—and waited by the front door.

Part of her hoped that Bert would never return and part of her prayed that he would.

DESCENT INTO MADNESS

Chapter Three

Sheriff Andrew Barnes seemed older than his years. Even out of uniform he looked like a cop. A Southern cop, given the wad of tobacco in his mouth, but a cop nonetheless. His creased skin was almost as brown as his crew cut hair and his eyes and darker than his uniform. He looked up from his paperwork at the well-dressed man who stood before his desk, immediately sizing him up and finding him wanting.

"Can I hep ya?" Barnes drawled.

"Yes, Sheriff, I think you can. My name's Bert Himes." He offered the Sheriff a hand. "I hear you may have an opening for a psychologist."

Barnes halfway stood up and shook the proffered hand. His expression was one of total shock. "Andrew Barnes," he managed to say. "Good t' meet you." Both men sat.

"Here's my resume. I've spent the past 11 years running my own practice, but I've done a lot of consulting for the police on the side. Down in Tampa, Florida."

"Y'ever hire out to the defense lawyers?"

"No, sir."

Barnes took a moment to study the resume, then looked up at Bert. "When you say runnin' your own practice, does that mean you spent the day tellin' rich old ladies their problems come from how they were potty trained and billin' 'em more fer an hour than I make in a week?"

Bert laughed. "An exaggeration, but not as far off as you might think. I think that's why I started consulting with the police, so I'd feel like I was working for a living. I'd really rather be working with your department."

"That's good, 'cause we ain't got much call for the other kind of head shrinkin'. It says here you've been in Florida all ya life."

"Yes, sir."

"You're a long way from home. What brings ya up here?"

"Really, I just drove up the interstate until I saw someplace I liked. A small rural community, wide-open spaces, beautiful countryside."

"Hmm. You're not runnin' from anything, then. Ya just jumped in the car one day and ended up here."

"Yes."

"You didn't plan it in advance or nuthin'."

"That's right."

"And you had your resume with you."

"I always keep a current resume in my briefcase."

Barnes stared at Bert Himes for a long moment. "Let me tell you

somechin', boy. We got a openin' for a shrink. I don't think we need one. I think you'll only get in our way. But the County Commission doesn't care what I think. At least they let me decide who to hire."

"Good."

"So I interviewed a guy like you a few weeks back. A city-bred college boy outsider type. His name was David O'Neill. He took the job and gave a notice at the old one. Today was s'posed t' be his first day, but he never showed."

"I can start right away."

"Now let me finish. I don't know what brought ya up here. On the very day the other fella didn't show up, didn't call, not so much as a *kiss my ass*, here you are. Another shrink, out of work, wantin' to start right away. You could call it Fate. But I ain't gonna give you the job."

"Why not? If I can ask, I mean."

"Yeah, you can ask. I don't like a man who can look me in the eye and lie with a straight face. I don't like being lied to, period, but especially not by someone I can't catch when he's doin' it. I'll never trust you."

"What lie is that?"

"Nobody just hops in the car and drives six or 700 miles and starts over if everything in his life is just fine. Talkin' 'bout change is all well and good, but nobody ever does it unless *something* spurs him on. Now I don't care what you're runnin' from. I don't care if ya killed Mother Theresa and the Pope in a hit and run down there. But I'll never be able to trust ya, because ya lied to me like ya had a lifetime of experience doin' it."

He had to fight back a shudder when Barnes said the words *hit and run*.

"My wife," Bert finally admitted. "It just wasn't working out."

"Were you married long?"

"Ten years."

"Any kids?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"We always wanted kids, but we just kept putting them off for one reason or another. Last year, Wendy did conceive—it was planned—but she lost the baby last month."

"Sorry t' hear that."

"Thank you."

"And now you've up an' hauled ass. Didja ever stray?"

"Once."

"Was it someone you knew?"

Bert nodded. "Someone I could probably fall in love with."

"That sure woulda complicated things."

"You've asked me a lot of questions, but almost none of them have anything to do with the job."

"Could be 'cause I don't know what the job is yet. Damn politicians are makin' it up as they go. I just like to know who I'm gonna be workin' with."

"Does that mean I'm hired?"

"That's really up to the Commission, but yeah, seein's as how I'm so desperate, I guess it does. They'll hire anyone I recommend if you don't get too stupid about the money or somethin'. You wanna go find a place to live first and come on back in the mornin' then?"

"Yes sir." Bert rose to his feet and offered his hand again. "Thank you, sir."

Barnes rose and shook Bert's hand. "At least you ain't a Yankee or a nigger."

§

Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary watched Bert Himes screw his wife. For many years, it had been his fantasy to have sex inside a church, but his wife had always objected. Until now.

St. Mary's Catholic Church was not only a place of worship; it was a work of art. Bert lay on his back, naked, between the altar and the marble statue, in a plush satin-lined coffin. Wendy lay atop him, massaging his organ as her lips moved down his chest and abdomen. She sucked him until he thought he could contain himself no longer, then climbed atop him and put his rigid cock inside her. He quickly achieved orgasm.

"Oh, Chris!" he cried out in ecstasy.

Wendy's eyes locked onto his. Her expression changed into one of pure malice. She lowered herself down onto him, ready to take his erection once more, as her vagina opened to reveal a set of gaping jaws.

"No!" Bert cried. He was unable to resist as she forced his erection into her fanged vagina. Her jaws ripped his penis from his body. He screamed out in agony.

The telephone rang and Bert sat up sharply in his coffin. No, he realized, it wasn't a coffin. It was a bed. It had only been a nightmare. The telephone was still ringing. Bert answered it on the seventh ring.

"Yeah?"

"Bert, it's Chris. You awake?"

"Yeah, I'm awake. What's up?"

"We've got a jumper down here. He killed his girlfriend and now he's out on the roof. I hate to call you on your day off, but we're close to your house and nobody else could get out here quick enough."

Bert glanced at the clock on the dresser. It was 3:36 a.m. "No problem, I can handle it."

Chris gave Bert the address and five minutes later he was there. Bert fought his way through a mob of onlookers. Chris helped him past the line of yellow police tape.

"Glad you could make it," she stated as they walked to the apartment building.

"No problem," Bert lied. His eyes burned whenever he opened them and a sharp headache stabbed him behind his left temple.

"The perp's full of PCP," Chris explained as they entered an elevator. "The woman he lived with was pregnant and he suddenly realized that the child was the Anti-Christ. He hacked her belly about 40 times with a meat cleaver, then was overcome with surprise and remorse when she died."

"How long has he been threatening to jump?"

"About 20 minutes," Chris answered. "Come on, it's right down the hall."

Bert followed Chris into the apartment. As usual, she walked too fast. When they entered the room, Bert had to quickly turn away from the woman's body.

"Sorry," said Chris, "I thought they were done with that."

Bert turned back to the body. It was Chris. Bert looked around and saw no one except the corpse of the woman he loved.

"This isn't right!" Bert shouted, running toward the balcony. "This isn't right!" he shouted as he rushed outside. "This isn't how it happened!"

Chris's dead husband, Caleb, was on the balcony. He was a tall man, thin but muscular, dressed in his police uniform. His shirt was red with his blood. He pointed at Bert.

"You did this to me," Caleb stated. "Every time you fucked my wife, you did this to me."

"You're dead!" Bert shouted. "This isn't how it happened! You were already dead!"

Caleb wrapped his large, sinewy hands around Bert's throat. Bert tried to pry them loose, but Caleb's grip was unbreakable. His fingers dug into Bert's flesh. His breath stank of something long dead. Bert felt his blood pounding in his head. He grew dizzy and his vision blurred. He wished the bastard would either let go or just crush his windpipe and get it over with.

A telephone rang. Bert opened his eyes and saw that he was lying in a bed. He'd been dreaming about Tampa. A dead man wasn't choking him. He felt something on his arm. There were hundreds of ants crawling on it. Bert bolted upright in his bed.

Where are the ants coming from?

Bert saw thousands of red fire ants crawling all over his body, biting him everywhere. He tried to brush them off, but there were simply too many. He screamed out in pain and terror as he slapped at them.

The phone rang again and the ants were gone. There were no ant bites on his body. Bert answered the telephone on the seventh ring.

"Yeah?"

"Bert, it's Chris. You awake?"

Haven't I done this before?

"No, I'm not awake yet. Hang on a second."

He set down the telephone, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He opened his eyes to see that he was in his bedroom, at the old house that he was renting in Cochrane, North Carolina. He picked up the phone again.

"Yeah, I'm awake. What's up?"

"We got a jumper down here. He killed his girlfriend and now he's out on the roof. I hate to call ya on your day off, but we're close to your house and nobody else could get out here quick enough."

"A jumper? Who is this?"

"Sheriff Barnes. Are you sure you're awake?"

Bert glanced at the clock on the dresser. It was 3:36 a.m.

"This isn't happening. I'm still asleep."

Bert hung up the phone and moved to get out of bed. He pulled the covers aside and sat up. Then he heard snoring. He looked down at the bed. On the pillow that he hadn't been using was the definite impression of someone, or something, lying there.

"I'm seeing things."

Bert closed his eyes and took another deep breath. He stopped mid-breath when he heard a low, deep growl. Bert's eyes snapped open. There was a huge black Doberman pinscher on the bed with him. It lunged at Bert's throat and wrapped its jaws around his neck.

The telephone rang again and the moment was gone. Bert put a hand around his throat as he struggled to breathe. He finally regained enough self-control to answer the telephone on the seventh ring.

"Yeah?"

"Ya hung up on me, Bert. Are ya awake now?"

He struggled to make his throat work. "I don't know."

"Yeah, I'm the same way in the mornin'. Listen, I hate to call you at this time a' night, but—"

"Hang on a second," he said. "Who is this?"

"Well hell, Florida, I thought for sure you'd know my voice by now. This is the Sheriff. Andy Barnes."

"Not Andy Taylor?"

"Hell no, this is Cochrane not Mayberry. Now are you awake or not?"

Bert glanced at the clock on the dresser. It was 3:36 a.m. "I still don't know."

Barnes was silent a moment. "You sure you're all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"No reason. Listen, I've got this kid in my jail that I'd like you to take a look at."

"Is he a jumper?"

"A jumper? Oh, you mean like off a buildin' or somethin'. No, nuthin' like that. Old Dexter says this nut's been hangin' 'round the graveyard for the past few nights. I know I shoulda waited 'til mornin'—he can't hurt

nuthin' from in my jail—but, well, to tell ya the truth he gives me the creeps."

"No problem," Bert said, grateful for an excuse to get out of the house. He looked at the pillow, smooth as if it had never been slept on. "I'll be right down."

Bert hung up the phone, hurriedly put on his clothes and ran from the old house. When he was done with Barnes, he decided, he would find a new place to live.

§

Bert Himes left the jail area of the small police station and entered the office area. "He seems pretty harmless to me, Sheriff. Weird, but harmless."

"Think we oughta send him to a hospital for evaluation?"

"It certainly wouldn't hurt, but it can wait until tomorrow. I gave him a sedative. Maybe you need a shrink around here after all."

"Maybe," Barnes reluctantly admitted. "I hope I didn't interrupt anything too interesting."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well hell, Florida, judgin' by them love bites on your neck, you musta found yourself a real animal."

Complete with bloody fur and the stench of the grave on its breath.

"Oh. Yeah, she was something else."

Barnes stared into Bert's face for a long moment. "You can't lie to me as well as you used to. You sure you're all right?"

"I'll be fine. Thanks."

"It's the house, ain't it?"

"What do you know about the house?"

"That's Old Widda Thorpe's place. She lived there alone with a big black Doberman pinscher, closer than a mamma and a baby, but then one day the dog snapped and ate her."

Bert involuntarily reached up to touch his neck.

"I found a few of her bones over by the fireplace, like he'd just had hisself a good ole time. The rest of the body—and it wasn't a whole hell of a lot—I found on the bed, covered with thousands of ants."

A shudder ran up Bert's spine.

"Nobody knows what made the dog snap, though. He seemed like a big sweetheart, even after."

"Not even a theory?"

"Not a one."

Bert stared into Barnes's eyes. "Now *you're* lying to *me* with a straight face."

"It's in my job description."

"What made the dog snap?"

"We had a lawyer fella living out here, Terrence Howell. His wife was Sandra, and Old Widda Thorpe was Sandra's mom. Sandra was hospitalized by a brain tumor that for all practical purposes killed her ass. But you know how tough the laws are on mercy killing. It was prob'ly a good two months before Howell got permission to unplug the wife from her machines. Just as the doctor was doin' the deed, Sandra sat up in the bed, perfectly alive and healthy."

Bert shuddered. "Just like Wendy."

"What?"

"Nothing. Go on."

"Now some folks say it wasn't really Sandra that came back. That her body was between life and death for so long that somethin' from the other side just hitched a ride on over. The first thing Terrence and Sandra did was visit her mom, Old Widda Thorpe, and 30 minutes later the dog ate her."

"Damn," Bert muttered. "I've gotta get out of that house."

A man entered the office at that moment. He was short and stocky, with a balding head and dark brown eyes that darted from place to place. He sweated under a slate blue leisure suit.

"Windham," Barnes said. "What brings your sorry ass out this early in the mornin'? I didn't hear no ambulance drivin' by, so I know you weren't chasin' it and just happened to be in the neighborhood."

"You're a fucking riot," Windham replied in a pronounced Chicago accent. "I was at the library—"

"I didn't know you could read."

"Yeah, people from outside North Carolina do it all the time. But the library's got a busted toilet, so I figured I'd come over here and take a nice long stinkin' crap."

"Why don't you go up the road to O'Shea Stables?" Barnes replied. "They've still got a workin' outhouse you can prob'ly use. Just don't try to fuck one a' the horses. They tend to frown on that sorta thing."

"Don't worry, where I come from we don't fuck barn animals like you do down here. Besides, just last night I banged your wife. But don't worry, she wasn't good enough to bang again."

"Must be 'cause my big ole dick stretched her out so much you couldn't feel nuthin'."

"Let me take you to Reade's for breakfast," Bert suddenly said to Windham. "I'll buy."

"You'll buy? I'm there."

"Why would you buy *him* breakfast?" Barnes questioned. "The sight of that slimy weasel across the table from you'll kill your appetite."

Bert turned to Windham. "Let's go."

Five minutes later, they were sitting in a small country restaurant drinking strong black coffee.

"So Himes," Windham said, "Why'd you bring me here?"

"I know we haven't gotten along in the past, with you usually pleading insanity for the same people I know aren't crazy—"

"Wait a minute, Doc. Anybody who'd move to a place like this is probably unbalanced to start with or else they'd stay away from all these crazy inbred hillbillies. Which reminds me, what brought you down here? Or up here, I guess I should say."

"As I was saying, we haven't always gotten along, but we do have one thing in common."

"What's that? A lack of sense?"

"Okay, two things. We're both outsiders. So I think I trust you more than I do most people. Or at least, you trust me more than they do. I need a place to live."

"Hey, I don't let guys move in with me—"

"No, but you know what's available. As a lawyer, you know where the motivated sellers are, who's got the dirty little secrets, who's strapped for cash so bad that they've gotta sell right away."

Windham laughed. "That's low. Lookin' to gain from someone else's misfortune. I knew there was something I liked about you."

"No, it's just that I need to move right away."

"Oh yeah, you're renting the old Thorpe place. I don't blame you for wanting to get the hell out. Do you know the history of that place?"

Bert nodded. "Barnes was telling me about it right before you got there."

"The only thing I know about, and it ain't no big secret, is the real estate auction later today. I'll be there myself."

"Are they just selling land, or are there places to live too?"

"They've got it all. But I should probably warn you, since you're leaving the Thorpe place and all, that there's some things you might not want to buy at this auction."

"Why's that?"

"Do you know who Terrence Howell is?"

"I've heard of him."

"He was Thorpe's son-in-law. About a month ago, his dad, Big Jim Howell, learned he was going to die of cancer and went apeshit about it. He filled his pickup with shotguns, drove it through the front of the IRS building and started shooting everybody in the place. The cops killed him, of course."

"Damn."

"For years and years, he told everybody that if he ever learned he didn't have long to live, he'd do something like that. Turns out he meant it. So anyway, Terrence Howell inherited all his shit. Damn near a thousand acres of prime riverfront property. Houses, trailers, vacant lots."

"So he's selling it all?"

"No, he died. Just last week, Terrence blew his own brains out with a shotgun. It seems he outlived everybody in his will and he's got no other

family, so it's all going to auction. Nobody in his right mind will buy Terrence Howell's old house, but they'll be bidding on Big Jim Howell's property."

"What's wrong with Terrence Howell's old house?"

"Nothing, if you don't mind ghosts. I mean, here's a guy who found his wife fuckin' some guy she'd never seen before. Just having her in the house was screwy, with her dyin' and then coming back to life. So Howell blows away the wife and the lover. Then he turns the shotgun on himself. With a history like that, the place has gotta have ghosts."

"There's no such thing as ghosts."

"You can say that after what you saw in the old Thorpe place?"

"What makes you think I saw anything?"

"You want to move out, don't you?"

"It's psychosomatic. I left a few things undone back in Florida—"

"Yeah, I'm not here for cheap land alone either."

"I just need a change of scenery, that's all."

"Okay, fine. I believe you. I guess I'll see you at the auction, then."

"Yeah."

§

The auction was held at a wooden house on stilts. A platform and a sound system were set up on the wraparound porch. The yard was a wide opening surrounded by thick woods and swamp, and the opening was full of vehicles.

Windham caught up with Bert in the screened-in area below the porch, where refreshments waited on picnic tables. Kegs of beer nearby, of course. They stood together in the yard, the two outsiders, waiting for the auction to begin.

The crowd was chatting, socializing and generally relaxing. There was a mildly festive air about the gathering, as if the people of Cochrane appreciated any reason to mingle outdoors. The atmosphere changed visibly when the auctioneer spoke.

"Lot 7540," he said. The crowd grew silent. "The bidding will open at —"

"Satan has been at work in that house!" shouted an old woman from the crowd. She walked toward the front of the gathering as she spoke. All eyes were upon her.

She was wearing pale blue slacks covered with pink floral patterns, a yellow blouse, and a crocheted maroon shawl. Her clothes were cut broadly, as if to camouflage the bulk of a fat woman. She was trying to hide her unnatural thinness, but it still showed in her exposed hands and neck.

She was old and bent, with accusing green eyes and a wild mane of white hair and brown wrinkled skin like old shoe leather. She stared straight into the crowd for a long moment. She clutched her Bible more tightly. Her

thin lips parted, revealing pale yellow dentures, and she spoke in a brittle voice.

"When the dead walk among the living and the people fall away from God and cast their eyes upon the road to Hell, then beware! The Day of Judgment is close at hand!"

"Put a sock in it, Gramma!" Windham snapped. "That's Zenobia Crandall," he told Bert loudly enough for everyone to hear. "Two years ago she married a 21-year-old immigrant farm worker so he could stay in the country. Four months later he died of a heart attack. You know what killed her first old man?"

Bert shook his head, wondering why Windham had singled him out.

"A heart attack. If you ask me, both of 'em opened their eyes during sex. Seeing a face that ugly having an orgasm would be enough to kill anybody."

"You will rot in Hell!" Crandall snapped amidst raucous laughter.

"And you'll be sucking my dick," Windham replied.

"Heed my warning!" Crandall shouted at the crowd, then stormed angrily away.

"Just be sure you take out your dentures first," Windham yelled at her back. "I'd hate for you to forget yourself and bite the damn thing off." He turned to the auctioneer. "So whadda ya waitin' for? Start the bidding already."

"Ten thousand," said the auctioneer with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

"Raise your hand," Windham whispered. "You could burn down the damn house and get more than that for the land."

"Why don't you raise *your* hand?" Bert replied.

"I'm saving my money for the house in front of us."

"Maybe I'll bid on that."

"Bite my ass."

"Ten thousand," the auctioneer repeated. "The bidding starts at ten thousand."

"Do it," Windham urged. "No one'll bid against you."

"Do I have any bids?" the auctioneer asked.

After one more glance at Windham, Bert raised his hand.

"I have ten thousand. Do I hear 11? Do I hear 11? Ten going once. Ten going twice. Sold for ten thousand."

Bert left the auction as soon as the paperwork was done. Zenobia Crandall intercepted him before he reached his car.

"The house doesn't have any rats in it," she said.

"I'm glad to hear that, but I'm in a bit of a hurry—"

"Do you know why it doesn't have rats?"

Zenobia Crandall obviously wouldn't let Bert leave until she'd said what she'd come to say, so he resigned himself to hearing it. "No, I don't. Why doesn't the house have any rats in it?"

"They left."

"That makes sense."

"I saw them. Waves and waves of rats, all leaving. They always do that right before someone dies. They left and the next morning the Howells were found dead."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"There's lots of signs that someone will die," Crandall stated, "But by the time you see them it's too late. Don't move into that house. It's evil."

Bert laid a hand on Crandall's bony shoulder. "Unlike Mr. Windham back there, I appreciate your concern. But to be quite honest, I'm an atheist. I don't believe in ghosts, devils, or haunted houses."

"You will," she warned. "You will."

§

Bert parked his car in front of a redwood A-frame house. A thin boundary of pine trees in the front yard separated it from the ditch and the highway, and a thick boundary of gums and pine trees shielded the yard along the other three sides. A gravel driveway split the tree line up front and widened a few feet from the porch. The porch, which ran along the front and one side of the house, was three feet above the ground. Stairs led up to the deck and pine lattices covered the opening between the porch and the ground.

Bert got out of his car and stared at his new house.

"It's beautiful."

The lattices began to shake and after a moment they fell. Dozens of gray and brown rats scurried out from beneath his house and rushed into the woods.

"Damn." Bert leaped into the car and started it. Then he changed his mind and got out. "Damn."

There's lots of signs that someone will die. But by the time you see them it's too late.

Bert walked up the stairs and across the porch to his front door. He put the key in the lock and started to turn it. Then his determination faltered. He stood at the threshold of his house for a long moment, waiting for....

He didn't know why he was waiting. He unlocked the door slowly, as if he expected some unknown terror to strike. Chuckling nervously, he opened the door. He looked inside the house and he was impressed.

The front door was in the center of a 40-foot wall and from it he could see most of the downstairs. The walls were paneled and the floor was carpeted in matching shades of light brown. The ceiling was sawn fir. To his left were a large china cabinet and an elegant dining table with four chairs. To his right was a comfortable living room. He faced an open utility room

door, a closet door and a set of stairs. To the left of the utility room was the kitchen and to the right of the stairs was an office. Neither of them had a door.

Bert reached to his right and flipped some light switches. Several porch lights came on, as well as lights and ceiling fans above the dining room table and the center of the living room. Bert moved a few boxes from the car to the middle of the floor. He was surprised at how much he'd accumulated in the short time he'd lived in Cochrane.

Bert yawned. "Time to see the bedroom."

A set of stairs led to a landing. A second set of stairs led from the landing up to the second story. Bert walked up the rest of the stairs and paused in the short hallway at the top. He stood before an open door that led into a large walk-in closet. At one end of the hall was an empty bedroom. At the other end were a bathroom and then the master bedroom. Bert entered the master bedroom, opened a window, and kicked off his shoes.

A male voice grunted from the waterbed. A woman's voice screamed with ecstasy. The bed sloshed. The male moaned with pleasure as the woman's screams intensified. There was no one on the bed, but it moved as if someone were making love on it. The smell of sex was overpowering.

Bert ran down the stairs faster than he'd ever run in his life. He fought with the front door, but it refused to open. The coffee table rose up three feet into the air, rotated 360 degrees and fell. The light fixture above the coffee table beside him had three bulbs. One of them exploded. Bert whirled to face the light fixture. Another bulb exploded. As he ran toward the dining room, he heard the third bulb explode behind him.

Bert snatched a chair from the dining room table. Above him, the fan and the light fixture made a strange whirring noise.

"C'mon," he challenged. "Explode."

A light bulb exploded. Bert pulled the chain and turned off the lights. A second later, the lights came on and a bulb exploded. He pulled the chain again. After another second, the third light came on and exploded.

"Shit."

All three downstairs fans stopped, then came on again. Bert threw the chair at the window with all his might. It bounced back. He snatched up the chair and slammed it into the window again. Two legs broke off the chair, but the window remained undamaged.

Bert ran into the living room and slammed the remains of the chair against one of the windows. Again, the glass refused to break.

"I believe! Is that what you want to hear? Is it?! I believe, goddammit! *I believe!!*"

Behind him, the heavy dining room table rose into the air again. Bert could only watch, transfixed with horror, as it rotated 45 degrees and fell so that its legs were balanced on the backs of the three chairs around it.

Bert dropped the fourth chair and fell to his knees.

"Dear God, I believe in you! Please make it stop. I was wrong. Just please make it stop."

DESCENT INTO MADNESS

Chapter Four

A sharp pain in Bert's neck awakened him from a poor attempt at sleep. When he opened his eyes, his first sight was a windshield. It was dark outside the car and he didn't know where he was. His eyes drifted down to a blurry reflection near the dashboard. On the passenger seat, atop his briefcase, were some pamphlets. They bore the atom-styled logo of American Atheists.

Bert bolted up in his seat and turned to the pamphlets. He'd thrown them out shortly before trading in the old car. He looked at the car's interior.

"I'm in the old car!"

He was parked at a rest stop that looked uncomfortably familiar. He got out of the car and looked around.

"I'm back in Florida!"

Bert ran to the front of the car. He could see by the light of the full moon that it was dented and bloody, as if he'd recently killed a pedestrian.

"No! I didn't dream about North Carolina! I didn't!"

He rushed back into the car.

On the radio, the comforting voice of James Taylor sang, "Ain't it just like a friend of mine to hit me from behind? Yes, I'm going to Carolina in my mind."

Bert turned off the radio and drove out onto the highway.

"This is impossible. You're losing it, Bert. You're losing it."

He continued driving, remembering all that had happened to him in Cochrane. It had to be real.

"I'll just drive the way I did before. If I find Cochrane, then I'll know it was real. Otherwise, I'll know I imagined it all."

Bert's first trip to Cochrane had taken three days. This trip took under 12 hours. He washed the car at the same car wash. He withdrew half of the money in the checking account from the same ATM machine. He stopped at the same roadside car lot. He traded in his old car for the same car that he'd driven to Cochrane before and he drove it to Cochrane again.

"I remember Cochrane. But does it remember me?"

He drove through town as if he'd lived there for the past two months. Soon he was at the Sheriff's Office. It looked the same. He parked in a visitor's space. He remembered to take his briefcase with him.

"If I haven't been here before, I'll need a resume. Damn, I've gotta quit talking to myself so much. People might think I'm nuts."

Two deputies were leaving the building. Bert didn't know them. But there were several deputies he hadn't met yet. He wanted to find someone

he knew.

"May I help you?" asked the young woman behind the desk. She had the musical accent of the Riegelwood area.

"I'd like to talk to the sheriff," Bert replied.

"Wait right here and I'll get him. And you are?"

"Bert Himes."

After a moment, Bert got another shock.

"You lookin' for the sheriff?" Windham asked in his thick Chicago accent. He was dressed in the tan and brown uniform of the Cochrane County Sheriff's Department, but he wore it badly.

Bert got to his feet. "Yes, I'm Bert Himes."

Windham extended his hand. "Sheriff Clyde Windham. How's it goin'?"

"Can we talk somewhere?"

"Sure. My office is right over here."

Bert followed Sheriff Windham into his office. It was the same office that Barnes had used. It had different furniture and personal effects in it, but it was just as sloppy as before. Windham sat in the chair behind his desk, below a huge framed portrait of Coach Mike Ditka wearing a Bears sweater. Bert sat in one of two chairs before it.

"So what can I do for you?" Windham asked.

"My name's Bert Himes. I've been a psychologist in Tampa, Florida, for about 11 years, but I've always wanted to move to North Carolina, some place rural. I was up here on vacation and I saw an ad in the paper saying you need a criminal psychologist—"

"We haven't run an ad in the paper."

"Well, uh—"

"But we do happen to need a criminal psychologist. You say you've always wanted to move to North Carolina. Why?"

"Sheriff, what brought you up here? Or down here, in your case."

"Sometimes I wonder that myself. The whole damn department looks like a cross between *Deliverance* and *The Dukes of Hazzard*—ignorant, bigoted, hillbilly throwbacks to a time long since passed into a history best forgotten. No wonder Jesse Helms keeps winning elections."

Bert chuckled.

"Maybe it's because we don't have race riots and drive-by shootings," Windham continued. "But we're not here to talk about *me*, we're here to talk about *you*. What brings you up here?"

"Nobody could live in Florida before they invented air conditioning. There's nothing to see outside but people, pollution and concrete. But the countryside here is beautiful, the weather is perfect, and I hate crowds."

"You're not running from anything, then."

"Just my wife," Bert admitted.

"So you hate crowds and you live in Tampa."

"That could be why I hate crowds."

"You got a resume in that briefcase?"

"I think so." Bert moved his briefcase from the floor to the chair beside him and opened it.

"The Commission thinks I need a shrink and they'll be your boss, but they're letting me recommend who to hire. I'll look over your resume and pass it on to them. If it don't look too awful bad—"

"It doesn't," Bert said, handing Windham a resume. "I've got more experience in psychiatry than psychology, but I'm looking to change that."

"—I'll probably recommend hiring you and they'll probably go for it. They're cheap, but other than that... Where can we reach you?"

"I just got into town. Can you suggest a place?"

"Cochrane's only got one motel. Down on Wright Street."

"Then you can reach me there." Bert reached out to shake Windham's hand. "Thank you for your time, Sheriff."

"Yeah, no problem." Windham smiled and shook Bert's hand. "I'll walk you out. I was goin' to lunch anyway."

Bert and the sheriff walked to the front desk.

"I'll call you in a day or two," Windham told him.

"Okay, Sheriff. Thanks again."

Windham and the girl at the front desk talked about other business as Bert walked away.

"What should I do with this?" she asked.

"What is it?" Windham replied.

"The ID badge we made for O'Neill."

Bert spun around. "O'Neill? *David* O'Neill?"

"Yeah, that's right," Windham replied.

"Can I see that?"

"Why?"

He didn't show up the last time I was here, either.

"I think I know him," Bert lied.

"I doubt it," Windham replied. "But here. Catch."

Windham threw the picture badge to Bert. Bert was curious to see the man he'd replaced in both realities. Curiosity gave way to total shock when he saw the picture.

David O'Neill, the criminal psychologist who was scheduled to work in Cochrane but who never arrived, was the same man Bert had killed on Highway 821 in Florida.

§

Bert skidded his car to a stop in front of Terrence Howell's old house. The latticework fell as waves of large ugly rats scurried from beneath the house and rushed toward the woods. Bert didn't care. He ran through them and onto the porch.

"It all began here. So now I'll end it here."

His key fit into the front door lock, but the knob wouldn't turn. Bert got a lug wrench from his car and ran back up the porch stairs. He used the flat piece on one end to pry open the closest window. He climbed through the window and over the back of the couch against the wall. He held onto the lug wrench, ready to use it as a weapon if necessary.

"Hey! What the *hell* are you doing in my house?"

Bert turned to the man who stood at the foot of the staircase. He was about Bert's age and size, with taut red skin over an angry face. A blue robe covered his broad-shouldered, almost triangular torso. His blue eyes glared at Bert and he held a double-barreled shotgun aimed at Bert's chest.

"Who are you?" Bert asked.

The man lowered the shotgun and pulled a trigger. A barrage of lead pellets burned into Bert's leg and knee. He fell to the ground.

"You pulled a weapon," the man stated. "My life was threatened. Now before I defend myself again, why did you break in here?"

"I thought this was Terrence Howell's house."

The man pulled the other trigger and blasted Bert's other knee. "I'm Terrence Howell."

"I—I—I heard you were dead."

Howell broke open his shotgun and reached into his pocket for two more shells. "You heard wrong."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Why?"

"We've both been locked in combat with the same demons, the ones that crossed over when Sandra spent so long on the threshold between life and death."

"That wasn't buckshot I hit you with before, but this is. How do you know my wife?"

"The same thing happened to my wife. The doctors shot her full of drugs and electricity, got some readings on their machines and patted each other on the back. But she was already dead. When I finally got them to unplug everything, Wendy came out of her coma and fucked someone she didn't know. I beat her for it."

Howell closed the shotgun and aimed it at Bert's chest.

"If I hadn't come up here, I'd have probably killed her for it. But so what if I did? That wasn't Wendy, just like what you killed wasn't Sandra. Something else was in her body. Some *thing* that never should have crossed over. Some *thing* that you had to kill."

Howell pointed the shotgun at Bert's head. "You're a psycho," he stated and pulled the trigger.

Screaming, Bert sat up in his bed. "No! I didn't dream it! It really happened! I lived in Cochrane before and Howell just shot me! I know what the hell I saw!"

"Bert?" asked a woman's concerned voice beside him. "Are you all right?"

Bert saw that he was on his bed in Tampa, back in his old bachelor apartment. Chris was sitting beside him, her eyes filled with concern.

"Bert?"

"I'm fine, honey," he muttered weakly. "Just fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

Chris sleepily lay back down.

What in the hell is going on here?

Bert remembered that, before he ever met Wendy, he'd dated Chris. It had been a largely physical relationship. After it ended, Chris met and married Caleb Moreno and Bert met and married Wendy.

But why am I here now? What about North Carolina? What about Wendy? I know what I did to her. Is my conscience deluding me into thinking it's before I beat my wife so I won't have to deal with what I've done?

Bert looked at Chris again. Her eyes were closed, a sleepy expression on her face. He realized just how much he loved her. If he were lying down, he knew she'd want to cuddle him. Sometimes that was better than the sex.

Jesus Christ, just what in the fuck is going on here? I'm going mad. That's the only explanation.

Bert continued staring at Chris, waiting for her to vanish and the truth to reassert itself. Which truth, he didn't know. But no, nothing changed. Chris remained at his side, oblivious to the fact that he was a madman.

What should I do? Just play along and wait for the fucking rules to change again? It'd be wonderful—I never realized before just how much I love this woman—but would it be healthy? Getting lost in some delusional fantasy world? I wonder where the hell I really am. Under hypnosis or in some padded room, probably. Should I play along? What other choice do I have?

"You know something?" Bert said. "You have a face that I wouldn't mind waking up to every day for the rest of my life."

"Mm hmm," she mumbled.

"Chris, marry me."

She sat up as if she'd been struck, then whirled around to face him. "What did you just say?"

"I want you to marry me. I've never been as happy as I am when I'm with you. I'm sorry if I seem distant sometimes, as if there's some private part of me that I don't want to share. I'll work on it, I promise. I just want to be with you, now and always and love you with all my heart."

Or at least until whoever or whatever changes all this shit again.

"You told me you weren't capable of love," Chris replied.

"You changed me."

"Let me think about it."

"Sure. Just don't take too long."

"Why?"

"I've got another woman lined up in case you say no."

Chris's eyes widened, then blinked as she burst into laughter. Bert slid under the sheets and hugged her body close to his, grateful that they were both naked. His organ sprang to attention and she took it inside her.

"Does this mean you'll marry me?" Bert asked.

Chris nodded briefly as she covered his mouth with her own.

This isn't real. I'm just play-acting, being the perfect caring man because it doesn't really matter. Chris looks and acts like the woman I love, but who the fuck is she really? If this thing lasts long enough, I don't see how I can stay away from North Carolina. When will this charade end?

§

Bert was standing behind his desk, in his small office in the Cochrane County Courthouse. Terrence Howell was standing across from him. Both men were stuffing papers into their briefcases because the night's work was done.

"Thanks for helping me with the Sentiff case," Howell said. "Although I still don't know why this couldn't wait until the morning."

"I've got a busy day tomorrow. I don't know if I could've squeezed this in."

"To hear Sheriff Barnes tell it, most of the time you just sit here in this office trying to look busy. He says we don't even need a shrink around here."

"Yeah, well, he says a lot of things. I'd say you're pretty well armed."

"I need to be. Have you ever seen Clyde Windham in a courtroom?"

"No."

"He's a piece of sleaze, and when you first see him walking down the street you just know he's a piece of sleaze. But get him in a courtroom and he's positively brilliant."

"Hey, I heard that Sandra came out of her coma."

"Yeah." Howell smiled, but not convincingly.

"I'd have to call that a miracle."

"I hear that word a lot."

"Congratulations. I mean that."

"Thanks."

"You're a lucky man to have her."

"Yeah."

"You seem troubled."

"Is that the shrink in you talking?"

"No, just a friend. Forgive me if I'm stepping out of line here, but I think I'm sensing trouble at home. Am I wrong?"

"Yes." Howell wondered why Bert wouldn't let the subject drop. "No."

"Is it anything you wanna talk about?"

"Not really."

"Why do married men appreciate Hell?" Bert asked.

"Excuse me?"

"At least in Hell they know why they're being punished. Is Sandra like that?"

"Like what?"

"Refusing to communicate, leaving you to guess what's going on."

"No. I don't want to talk about it. I've gotta go home now." Howell turned away to leave.

"Invite me over for supper."

Howell turned around to face Bert. "What? Why?"

"Your wife seems a little different since she's come back. Trust me, it's common after a coma. After a problem in her brain, she honestly might be different. There might be some lingering problem that the doctors missed because the symptoms don't really show up in the exam room. But I'm a psychiatrist. I've been trained to spot these things. I know what to look for."

"What, you want to look at my wife and tell me if she's nuts?"

"Not nuts, Terrence. Ill. Maybe there's a biological problem, something we have a cure for. Just let me spend some time with her and see if I see anything."

Bert knew he wouldn't see anything. But he'd saved David O'Neill's life just by staying out of Fort Lauderdale and now he'd save the Howells's lives. Or so it seemed to him now, if he was still even remotely sane at this point. He didn't know.

"What can it hurt?" Bert asked.

Bert knew he couldn't go any further. Coming right out with the story of what happened when Wendy returned from the grave would defy credibility. This was all he had, win or lose. He'd promised Howell a possible solution. Only Howell could decide to take it.

"What about Chris?" Howell finally asked.

"She's working the night shift this week."

"So you're really just trying to get out of cooking."

"You caught me. So can I come over?"

"Sandra's not a very good cook."

"That's okay. Neither is Chris."

"Sure, you can come home with me."

"Okay," Bert said, closing his briefcase. "Do I need to take an antacid first?"

"No, there's nothing wrong with her cooking. It just doesn't have any taste."

"Just the opposite of Chris. Hers tastes great but makes me throw up. Let me make a quick phone call. I'll meet you in the parking lot."

"Okay."

As soon as Howell was out of the room, Bert called Howell's house. He wanted to tell Sandra to get rid of her lover. The phone rang a dozen times with no answer.

"Maybe she's screwing him right now. Dammit, please let me help these people."

§

Bert followed Howell to his house. He got out of his car and stared at the latticework below the porch, waiting for the rats to come out.

"You okay?" Howell asked after a moment.

"What? Yeah, I'm fine."

Bert followed Howell up the stairs and across the porch.

"So how'd you end up in North Carolina?" Howell asked.

"I've just always wanted to come up here. God's Country, as they say. Charlie Daniels and James Taylor. Matlock and Andy Griffith. So I talked Chris into honeymooning here. We just drove until we found a place we liked. She really surprised me by talking to the police department about transferring."

As if someone else were pulling the strings. This can't be real.

"And?" Howell prompted as he unlocked the front door.

"I guess she just got tired of Tampa, where the cops are spinning their wheels because they're so outnumbered by the bad guys. Here she can really make a difference. I wanted to get out of private practice anyway, so here we are."

"Sandra must be upstairs," Terrence said. "Hmm, that's odd."

"What?"

"I don't smell any supper cooking. Damn! Maybe she had another seizure!"

Howell raced up the stairs two at a time. Bert rushed behind him.

"Sandra!" Howell shouted. "Sandra, are you all right?!"

Sandra didn't answer. *Of course not*, thought Bert. *She's screwing a stranger. I've got to stop Terrence from killing her and himself for it.*

Terrence reached the top of the stairs and rushed into the master bedroom. Sandra Howell lie naked in bed, lost in the throes of a tremendous orgasm. The waterbed sloshed violently. Sandra and her lover groaned and screamed. Bert had heard those sounds before. Sandra thrust her hips up and down against the man's groin.

"Sandra," Howell mumbled. She didn't seem to hear. He shoved past Bert and went to the walk-in closet. He quickly fished around and came out with a shotgun, then shoved past Bert to enter the bedroom.

"No," Bert said, suddenly coming to life. "No, Terrence, don't do this!"

Sandra stopped screwing the man and got out of the waterbed. The man scrambled to his feet and stood behind her, stunned.

"That's not my wife. That thing isn't my wife."

"You can't kill her."

"The hell I can't! I'm sending its fucking ass back to where it came from!"

Sandra stood before Bert and Howell, unashamed. "Care to join us?"

Howell raised the shotgun to fire. Bert leaped to stop him, but he was too far away. Howell pulled the trigger, blasting a massive hole in Sandra's torso. She crumpled to the floor.

"Damn!" the man shouted. "God damn!"

"You're next," Howell stated, aiming the gun at the man.

"No!" Bert shouted. "No!"

Howell raised the weapon. Bert leaped into Howell, slamming him against the wall. Bert grabbed the shotgun and tried to wrest it away from Howell. The stranger rushed past both of them and raced down the stairs.

Suddenly Howell yanked the gun from Bert's grasp. He ran into the hall, aimed the gun down across the handrail, and shot the man at the bottom of the stairs. The man fell to the ground, most of his head gone. Howell whirled to aim the gun at Bert.

"Don't do it!" Bert shouted.

Howell didn't reply. He simply pulled the trigger. Bert fell to the floor with a hole in his chest.

DESCENT INTO MADNESS

Chapter Five

Bert struck his wife across the face with the back of his hand. Her head and body spun around from the impact and she landed on the floor face down. Bert towered over her and struggled against the urge to kick her.

"Why couldn't you just stay dead?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. Naked and sobbing, she got to her feet. Bert's rage threatened to consume him. He was exhilarated at his own power, but he despised her for giving him that power.

He raised his hand to strike her again. He wanted her to back away or duck. He wanted her to block it. He wanted her to kick his knee or his groin. But no, she just stood there, waiting for him to strike again.

No. As much as I despise her, I loved her once. Once, she loved me too. I won't end it this way.

"Wendy, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

I sound like a jackass.

"Wendy, I love you."

Wendy stood there for a long moment, her eyes filled with tears. Bert realized that this was no abomination from beyond the grave. This was his wife, the woman he loved, and he'd done this to her.

This is the cold, hard, ugly truth. I always believed that I loved my wife, but now we've come to this. All that bullshit about killing pedestrians and running to North Carolina was crap. This is the truth, worse than anything I could have imagined. I didn't know I had this in me.

Bert put out his hand. After a long moment, she reached out with her own small hand. He gently lifted her to her feet. He hesitated, then tentatively reached out to put his arms around her. She instinctively jerked away from him. She caught herself and reluctantly let him embrace her. He hugged her tightly and cried at what he'd become.

"Never again," Bert said. "I promise you, never again."

"I—" Wendy began, then stopped. Bert waited patiently. "I'm going to get dressed," she said finally. Bert released his grip. Wendy quietly went to the bedroom.

There was a knock at the front door. Bert opened it and his jaw dropped. Chris threw her arms around him and gave him a long, lusty kiss.

What in the name of God is she doing here now? Oh hell, I was coming home to meet her when I caught Wendy screwing someone else.

"You were right," she said breathlessly. "The danger of doing it in your house is really making me hot."

"What?"

"Bert." Chris removed her arms from around him and gazed into his eyes. "What's wrong?"

I've lost my fucking mind, that's what's fucking wrong. Why do you have to be here? Why now?

"Wendy's here."

"What? I thought she was visiting her mother."

"So did I, but..."

Chris took his hand in hers. "But what?"

"It seems I'm not the only one plucking apples from someone else's tree."

"Maybe I should go."

"Please don't."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

I need to fix this. I need to fix this and then get some help.

The bedroom door opened behind them. They turned to see Wendy. On her face was a swollen purple bruise. She held a suitcase in her hand.

"Honey," Bert said, rushing across the room to stop her. "Please don't leave me."

Wendy turned to Chris, then back to Bert. "I see you didn't waste any time finding a replacement."

"No—"

"I hope you'll be happy together." She turned to Chris. "You'd better hope you can keep him happy, or he'll write you off for dead and beat you if you have the audacity to live."

Seeing the bruise on Wendy's face, Chris turned to Bert. Her shock gave way to accusation. Bert lowered his eyes in shame.

"Let go of my arm," Wendy told Bert. "Unless you're planning to hit me again."

"I would never—"

"You already did. I'm leaving."

Bert released Wendy's arm. "Where will you go?"

"I don't know and I don't care, as long as it's away from you."

"We can work this out."

"Why?" Chris snapped, striding across the room and facing Bert squarely as she spoke. "You always said this was what you wanted. Just let the bitch leave and be done with it."

It was as if Chris's words galvanized Wendy's spirit. "No," she said, turning from Chris to Bert, so it was unclear who she was speaking to. Perhaps herself. She glared at Bert and dropped her suitcase. "I'm staying. You get out. Now."

"But I love you."

"That's not enough anymore."

"Bert," Chris said. He turned to her. "Before you say another word,

choose. Me or her. Decide now."

Bert turned to Wendy, then back to Chris.

This is what life is all about—making choices. In all my delusional states, I ran from making this choice. But now here it is. The decision that only I can make.

Bert picked up Wendy's suitcase. "You won't be needing this."

"Are you staying with her or coming with me?" Chris asked.

"You're not staying here," Wendy stated.

"He deserves better than you anyway," Chris told Wendy.

"No, what he deserves is a slut like you."

Their words stopped at that point, but their hatred did not. They were looking to Bert for a sign. Wendy wanted him to take Chris and leave. Chris wanted to know that he was coming with her and that he wouldn't mind if she tore Wendy's head off on the way out.

"Give me a minute," Bert said finally.

Bert carried Wendy's suitcase to the bedroom. He wasn't thinking and barely even feeling. He was numb, acting on pure instinct.

Bert closed the door behind him, got his own suitcase from the closet and began to pack. He didn't know what he wanted to do. He just had to do something, anything.

Yes, this feels good. Packing my suitcase feels right. Should I leave them both? No, that doesn't feel right. Leaving Chris the first time around was a mistake. We were meant to spend the rest of our lives together, assuming she'll still have me after seeing that I hit Wendy. Maybe I'll end up losing them both. Even so, staying here isn't right. At least I've got that much figured out.

A blood-curdling scream cut through his thoughts. It came from the other room. Bert rushed into the living room. Chris's body was swinging from the rafters, a noose around her neck. Even before he checked on her, he knew that she was dead. He wrapped his arms around her and cried.

"Wendy!" he shouted. "Where are you?"

The woman he loved had killed the other woman he loved. Oddly, he was not angry. It was a shocking realization, but he was willing to hide this murder and spend the rest of his life with Wendy if she'd still have him.

"Where are you?" Bert repeated.

There was a sound in the kitchen. Bert left his dead lover and burst through the door to face Wendy. Her dead eyes stared straight into his, filled with terror. Her body hung from the rafters, just like Chris's, with a noose around her broken neck. She, too, was quite dead.

Bert's body shook with fear. Something had come into his house and killed both the women he loved. His fear and sorrow gave way to another emotion, one that was awesome in its terrible power. He shook not from terror, but from rage, as he cast his gaze skyward.

"No!" he screamed. "You bastard! Do you hear me? This isn't right!"

You can't do this to me! It just isn't right! Goddamn you, show yourself! Whoever you are—whatever you are—show yourself!"

"Be careful what you wish for," said a voice that came from nowhere, "Because you just might get it."

Bert stood in a room like no other. The walls and ceilings were diamond and their supernatural glow illuminated the room. The golden floor sparkled. The single ivory door in the center of one wall was ornamented with a simple brass handle and an ancient skull. A strip of plush crimson carpet led from the door to the throne in the center of the room.

"At times you think that your wife is a ball and chain that you need desperately to be rid of. Then you can move on to one of a dozen women you've rejected, opportunities you've let pass by. But then she is gone and you find that you were wrong, that there were no opportunities, that you are truly alone."

In the throne sat a majestic figure that could have easily been a prince, or a god. It was he who had spoken to Bert. He wore a simple black cloak over his fine pinstriped suit. His jet-black hair was short and neat, as was the moustache above his sinister mouth. His eyes were by far his most striking feature. They were compelling and hypnotic and one could easily lose oneself staring into their bottomless depths.

"Greetings, Mister Frengeheimer." His voice was smooth, deep and resonant. It was both aesthetically pleasing and undeniably commanding. "Welcome back to Hell."

Bert had never expected such a response to his challenges. This proved that he was either locked in combat with the spiritual realm or completely unhinged. The being before him, presumably Satan, had welcomed him back to Hell. He couldn't recall ever having been there. Also, no one had called him Frengeheimer in a long time.

Now I know I'm insane. This is totally impossible.

"I see," the man on the throne finally said. "We are dealing with a repressed childhood memory. But before we go on, I believe introductions are in order. Do I call you Mister Frengeheimer, or Mister Himes, or Englebert, or simply Bert?"

"Bert."

"Bert." The being smiled.

"Why did you do this to me?!"

"You had to confront both your women together. It was the only way to confront your feelings. Repression, as we both know, is bad for the psyche. I'm acting as your psychologist in this, old friend, and I'm not even billing you for the service."

"No! You undo this right now!"

"As for the random murderer who sneaked into your home and killed them both, he showed you a part of yourself that I could not."

"No, you killed them! You bring them back right this fucking minute!"

"I feel your rage, old friend. The same rage that made you strike Wendy down. You can tell her that you'll never do it again, but we both know that you are lying. Lying to her and to yourself. A battered wife should never return to her abuser, because he will always do it again. We both know this, Englebert. Always."

"The only rage I feel is at you!"

"You no doubt think of me as Satan, but I prefer to be called Ahriman. The Judeo-Christian devil hardly appears in its bible. The Persians wrote of the struggle between Ahura Mazda and Ahriman, and while most of it is pure fiction, at least it gives its devil equal time."

"You said welcome back to Hell."

"Ah yes, your repressed childhood memory. It is not surprising, as your whole life is one long series of denials. This is, after all, the human condition. You are so closed minded."

"All humans are. It's our nature. It keeps us from exploding into complete dysfunction."

"By becoming an atheist," Ahriman continued, "you deny my very existence and thus the nature of your spiritual difficulties. Before I go on, I want you to remember."

Bert remembered.

§

Englebert Frengleheimer was a failure in the truest sense of the word. He was ugly, disliked and not especially intelligent. His teachers criticized him and his peers despised him. School was pure hell and home wasn't much better. He had no goals, no purpose, not much of anything. Not even a dog.

One night in his darkest despair, he even prayed the following prayer.

"Satan, I would gladly give you my soul for three small wishes."

Then he dozed off into another fitful sleep.

When he awoke the following morning, he uttered his never-ending wish for good looks. A strange thing happened during the course of the day. His hair began to straighten and take on a dark brown color. His skin turned to a deep tan and his pimples disappeared. His face grew firmer and more commanding. His squeaky voice was transformed into an assured baritone. He grew taller, clothes and all and his sickly body grew strong and muscular.

His classmates couldn't understand how he'd changed so quickly into a force to be reckoned with, and his teachers fared little better. When he arrived home, it took a full 20 minutes to convince his parents that he was their son.

Hardly a normal day.

By then, he realized that Satan heard his prayer. No pitchfork-wielding demon had visited him, nor had he signed an aged parchment in blood. But

Satan had heard nonetheless. As the old cliché had it, Englebert's soul belonged to Satan now. Englebert felt wronged by it all.

After supper he tackled his homework. It had never been an easy task, but it had to be done if he was to maintain his solid D average. He tried to forget about Satan and get to work. Then an inspiration came to him.

"I realize that you have heard me, Satan. Very well. I now ask you for my second wish. It is a known fact that the human brain is an inefficient organ. So I wish that every ounce of my unused potential would come to the surface, so that I can use it as long as I live."

Englebert found himself enjoying school the following day. The boys watched him with awe and the girls gazed upon him with puppy love in their eyes. Learning was so easy that he barely noticed it happening. It was as though his brain were a sponge that absorbed all.

But most of his attention was upon solving his dilemma. Heavenly though his life now seemed, Englebert wanted his soul back. After maybe 60 years of bliss, he'd pay with all eternity. The price was too high. But how does a mere 13-year-old kid face the incarnate evil of eons?

Of course Englebert prayed to God, but He didn't help. He probably didn't care. If men must go to Hell through simple ignorance, why should God care about one who knowingly rejects Him?

Lucifer. The Shining One. Satan. The Enemy. Asmodeus. The Lord of Darkness. The serpent who had eluded the Omnipotent and destroyed His Creation. Englebert stood against him, truly and completely alone. Hardly a fair fight. But finally, Englebert had his answer.

"Satan, I am ready to make my final wish. In return for what I have given you, I demand the following. Gather up all your demons, get down on your hooves and knees, and beg Almighty God to forgive you for your sinful ways."

After making his third wish, Bert found himself standing in the same room that he was standing in now, 23 years later. His remembrance of that first conflict continued.

"Toto," Englebert mumbled, "I don't think we're in Kansas."

"Greetings, Mister Frengleheimer. Welcome to Hell."

"I love what you've done with the place," Englebert finally commented. "Hell of a decorator."

"You are full of surprises, Mister Frengleheimer. But of course you know that I didn't bring you here for a tour and a friendly chat."

"I had a feeling there might be something more."

"I will not honor that wish, nor must I do so. You renounced God, which is in itself punishable by eternal damnation. But from the kindness of my heart, I gave you two of your wishes. If you will make the third more reasonable, I shall grant it also."

"You will do as I commanded. You agreed to it."

"Did I?" Ahriman asked emotionlessly.

The agony that coursed through Englebert's body was excruciating in the extreme. Every nerve felt as though it were on fire, as though his flesh had been ripped away. It lasted only a few seconds, but those seconds seemed eternal.

"Forever is a long time," Satan stated quietly, ominously. "I know many ways to make a man suffer."

"And—and I-I'm always willing to learn. You couldn't break Job—"

Englebert had been convinced that the last bolt of pain was the most excruciating possible. He was mistaken. He knew nothing of his surroundings, nothing of his actions and his motives and the being before him. There was only the pain.

"You are a fool," Ahriman said finally.

"And you are a failure," Englebert retorted as firmly as he could manage. "You once thought you were mightier than God, but even now you cannot see that it is a lost cause."

"Neither can you. There are so many things beyond you. You men refuse to realize just how insignificant you truly are. The knowledge would shatter your eggshell minds. You are an ant, and I shall step on you until you are crushed."

Englebert lay in an ocean of blood, surrounded by hideous corpses. Some lacked limbs and heads, some had their faces ripped off, still others had guts dangling from their putrid remains. Blood flowed from every opening and pieces kept squishing and dripping and falling off. The stench of decomposition was so overpowering that Englebert could taste it. Inhuman creatures devoured the bodies and slurped and crunched and belched. The screaming never stopped.

Englebert just floated there, vomiting and wishing the nightmare would end.

To speak of Hell is one thing, but I have been there and the memories still haunt me. Why does God allow such terrors to exist?

Above all, Englebert feared that a creature would notice him. Ahriman finally allowed it to happen. A winged thing sailed through the air and sank its fangs into Englebert's face. A juicy eyeball oozed down its throat.

"Senses," Ahriman commented casually. Englebert lay on the floor of the throne room, shivering and crying. Blood gushed from his eye socket.

"Your preoccupation with senses is your greatest weakness. You strive to please them and you cringe in fear at the prospect of pain. With all your so-called intelligence and higher learning, you are no more than senses. Good and evil are lies, and you are dogs in search of a master who will scratch your bellies." Ahriman restored Englebert's eye to wholeness. "You humans are vile creatures, unneeded and unwanted. You cannot even stand each other. God can have your soul. I do not want it. Take your gifts and go."

"And my third wish?"

"You dare to ask for more?"

Englebert paused to summon his willpower. "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy—"

A bolt of lightning from Ahriman's hand slammed Englebert against the wall. He slumped to the floor craving death.

"I am not angry," Ahriman stated. "Rage prevents one from contemplating the finer tortures."

Englebert glanced down at himself to see that Ahriman had taken back his first wish.

"Nor will I kill you, for then I would no longer be able to punish you. I will leave you your intelligence if you go now. Your conscience is a far more merciful tormentor than I."

Englebert rose shakily to his feet. "For my third wish, you may repent alone."

Englebert's arms were wrenched from their sockets and his hands wrapped around his throat. His body felt like it was immersed in flames. He saw Ahriman smiling through the haze of pain. This was indeed Hell, and Evil reigned supreme.

"Freedom," Ahriman commented. "You do not have it, for I can always make your suffering worse. Men and angels bow to God, and God to his own kindness. Only I am free, and so it shall remain. You do not want freedom, even the freedom that you already have. You could not endure it. If I sent you back now, as you were before, what could you do?"

"You are not free. Your arrogance controls you and your failures will always haunt you. If I can, I will become one of those ghosts."

"But you cannot. Rumor has it that, once gained, enlightenment cannot be lost. Perhaps, but what is a man without his memories? If I were to make you forget all that has happened since you uttered your prayer to me, you would again be nothing."

Englebert's strength of will failed him.

"You see how much you owe me. It can be yours, free and clear, if you will but bow to me now."

"You're right. And I realize that eternity is too long for me to grasp. But still, leave me as I am now and I must resist you with all that I am."

"You will fail."

"That's not the point."

He chuckled. "No, I suppose it isn't. Nor is this," he said as the guillotine chopped off Englebert's head. "Nor this," he stated as the noose snapped Englebert's neck. "Or this," he added as the desert sun beat down on Englebert and the buzzards picked his guts.

"I tried explaining to Jesus that so many others would pay for his actions," Ahriman told Englebert as the shotgun blasted his mother's abdomen from her body. "He cared so much more about them than you do." An axe split his father's skull. "But he would not hear me. So I ask you, what

is the point?"

"Sensation. Physical and psychological. You cause pain and I want to end it. You're probably more stubborn, but I won't give up until you prove it."

For a brief moment, Ahriman's smile seemed almost tender. "Then I shall do so."

DESCENT INTO MADNESS

Chapter Six

"It's been a while," Ahriman stated and smiled. "Or has it?"

Bert stood before the throne once more, an adult again, but one who was haunted by what he'd just remembered. He was slow to compose himself. Ahriman waited patiently.

"Is this room really necessary?" Bert managed to ask.

"You wanted me to show myself, now didn't you?" Ahriman chuckled. "But I suppose you are right."

Bert was seated on a love seat, in the apartment that he and Wendy had once called home. The corpses of Wendy and Chris were gone. Ahriman reclined in the plush chair that faced it from across the coffee table.

"Shall I tell you why Wendy came back to life? Why you beat her? Why you killed David O'Neill and took his place? Because I wanted you to. Ahriman is your co-pilot, you might say. Perhaps you should print that on a bumper sticker."

"Nobody's heard of Ahriman."

"When your soul becomes mine, you do not burn in an everlasting fire while I stab your butt with a pitchfork. I am, like you, a scientist at heart. Have you read Job?"

"Yes."

"I knew that, of course. It was stolen from a Persian story that was also inaccurate. Yahweh and I didn't make a bet. Job was my first documented experiment."

"So what do you want?"

"It's been a while, Bert. Or has it?"

"You said that already."

"Since you missed the significance of my question, I asked it again. What if I told you that my tests never ended? What if I told you that you are still 13 years old?"

"I wouldn't believe you."

"Why not?"

Bert glanced down at his body. It was that of his awkward teenage self once more. "This isn't real."

"Then what is?"

"My life is real up to the point where you started fucking with it!"

Ahriman smiled. "Exactly. But you don't know where that point is."

"What do you want from me?"

"Nothing at all, my young Mister Frengleheimer. I only wish to contemplate Hell. In this we are, or should be, more alike than you care to

realize. Your god made us both and we both disappointed him greatly. One must therefore question his power, mustn't one?"

"Let me see if I've got this straight. You're refusing my third wish and claiming that you made me imagine the last 23 years. Then you've tortured me with everything you've got and now you want to discuss bad philosophy? Forgive me if I'm not thrilled at the prospect."

"This isn't abstract philosophy, Englebert, this is your future. My future. The future of all things. Why is there a Hell? Did your god know in advance that he would fail, that he would need a place to punish or dispose of those failures?"

"What do you want from me?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. But you want something from me."

"And that is?"

"Truth."

"Why would I care about what you claim is truth?"

"Because you have nowhere else to turn. Prayers are never answered and the Bible..." Ahriman chuckled. "The Bible is such a wondrous work. How can you believe this Jehovah of yours to be the creator of heaven and earth, when he cannot even create decent literature?"

"He isn't my Jehovah. I don't believe in him or in you."

Ahriman smiled. "It is not my goal to criticize. I am only trying to tell you the truth. Make that your third wish. To know the truth. No, on second thought, I will give you truth and still grant you a third wish. How is that?"

"Bite my ass."

Ahriman shook his head. "Your mother should wash your mouth out with soap. You have a body and your soul drives it. Jehovah is the soul of the universe. When you move an arm, you only think to move it. You don't fire each individual neuron. Yet the neurons do what you decide they must. For all we know, your neurons may even believe that they have free will. But the question never occurs to the man. To him it sounds ridiculous. Free will for neurons? It is beneath his consideration."

"If I ask you to shut up, will you do it without calling it a wish?"

"Jehovah briefly wondered about a being who could do anything at all except defy him, and I am the result of that idle thought. Would such a being have any freedom? If I cannot defy his wishes, if I can only do that which he allows, it would seem that I have no freedom at all. The question was resolved instantaneously in his mind, but his mind operates on a much larger scale than mine does. Such is the nature of a godly thought, and it only seems like eons to you or me."

"So you're really not bad, just misunderstood. I'm touched. Really, I am."

Ahriman laughed, but it sounded more rehearsed than sincere. "Perhaps that is why I like you, Englebert. Your cynicism almost equals my own."

"Perhaps. But I'm not as long-winded about it."

"The nature of heaven and earth bores you? Then go back to your little bed at your little house and your little school and your little world. It is without purpose, though. All life is without purpose."

"Including yours?"

"Especially mine. Goodbye now."

"Wait! Just wait, okay? I know I'm an adult. I didn't imagine the last 23 years. I didn't."

"You are sure of this?"

"Yes!" Such an assured declaration was followed by self-doubt. After a few moments, Bert became confident again. "I didn't imagine them."

Ahriman smiled. "No, Bert Himes, you did not. Shall I tell you the meaning of your existence?"

"Can I stop you?"

"No. Jehovah briefly mused on a universe, a framework within which all things and beings would exist. Would these life forms, operating in ignorance within this structured framework, be freer than I am? That is the meaning of your existence and that of every life form on this and every other planet. You are a fleeting thought in the mind of an all-powerful being. You don't need to worship him, know him, or even care about him."

Bert leaped at Ahriman in blind rage. He passed through him and slammed into the wall. Then both men were seated as before.

"Enjoyable but pointless," Ahriman stated. "It is truly not my goal to punish or torment, I assure you. I only wish to advance both our understandings."

Bert leaped at Ahriman again, with the same unsatisfying result.

"The human animal, more than any other, has a great love of communication. Perhaps you should try some witty repartee while you attack me. Who knows? I may even call you webhead."

Bert rushed at Ahriman and swung a foot at his genitals. Bert felt a foot slamming into his own genitals and then he was seated on the love seat gasping in pain.

"You simply must learn to control yourself. My dear Mister Rat, there is but one way from the maze, and that is to follow the trail of the cheese."

Bert glared at Ahriman. "My third wish is for non-existence, to have never been born."

"We are not here to discuss wishes, my dear Mister Frengeheimer. We are here to seek the ultimate truth that Jehovah chooses to hide from us."

"My third wish is to be stricken down with an illness that places me in a coma, a coma from which I never awaken."

"Until your body dies and your soul is mine again? You wouldn't be aware of the time that passed. No, what you need is to either destroy me, which is impossible, or to be shielded from me, which is also impossible. We are together forever, Mister Frengeheimer."

"Why are you doing this?"

"A true scientist needs many subjects and many repetitions."

"Is this because of my third wish?"

"I have already explained Jehovah to you. Do you still believe the wishes matter?"

"YES!!"

"We never met when you were 13. There are no wishes. You dreamed the whole episode. Don't confuse me with the Judeo-Christian myth that you so rightly rejected so many years ago."

Bert was unable to reply. All he had was his rage and his conviction that none of this was happening. He was waiting for it to end, so that he could have himself committed. Once he'd done that, of course, he'd have to wonder if the rubber room was simply another delusion. He could no longer trust his senses, his memories, or his perceptions.

"Do you truly wish non-existence?" Ahriman asked.

"Yes."

"Very well. I shall give it to you. The year is 1954. We are in Pompano Beach."

"What in the—?"

"Hell?" Ahriman guessed. He smiled.

"What in the hell are you doing to me now?"

"I am granting your wish. Your parents told you when and where they first met. If you go there now, you will witness that historic meeting. If you wish non-existence, you may have it, but you must earn it."

"Earn it?"

"Go to that quaint little tavern by the beach. See your parents now, before they ever have the intercourse that will make you. Kill one of them. Kill them both if you wish to be sure."

"Kill my parents?"

"I will make it easy for you. You are dressed appropriately, you have money, and there is a gun in a holster inside your left ankle. Can you feel it? You only have two shots, so make them count."

"I'm not—"

"Your pistol is small but you have a winning personality."

"I'm not playing any more games!"

"Do you really think oblivion is a game? This is no game, Mister Frengleheimer. I will not simply snap my fingers and have you vanish. You will do this yourself, to prove that non-existence is what you truly want. Go to the bar and kill them. Only then will you vanish."

Ahriman was gone. Bert was seated in a taxi.

Do I believe you this time, Ahriman, or is this just one more hoop for me to jump through for your amusement?

Ahriman didn't respond, as he'd vanished.

I know you hear me, asshole. I don't believe you, but I'll go play

anyway. Not much to lose except my dignity. Not that I have any.

"Hey, buddy," said the taxi driver. "Where to?"

"Capone's. On Front Street. And hurry."

DESCENT INTO MADNESS

Chapter Seven

In 1954, the bar known as Capone's was decorated in the style of the 1920s. Bert quickly scanned the restaurant and saw that neither of his parents had arrived. A shining jukebox played old songs by Elvis Presley and Bobby Darrin. Bert chose a stool at the bar that gave him a good view of the entrance, ordered a malt, and waited. Beer and liquor were tempting thoughts, but knowing his luck he'd get too drunk to shoot his targets. Especially since Ahriman dictated his luck.

If only I could shoot Ahriman and be done with this whole ugly episode.

As the place began to fill, Bert realized that some guy drinking malts at the bar would seem strange. He moved to a booth that gave him an excellent view of the door, ordered a burger and a cherry cola, and waited. They might think a man eating alone was pathetic, but not suspicious. Especially since he'd just become a paying customer.

Finally, Lois Preedom arrived. Bert recognized her from the pictures, but the pictures didn't do her justice. The woman who would become Bert's mother was gorgeous. Lois wore a colorful swimsuit that tried without success to conceal her assets, and she wore a pink robe over the swimsuit. Her smile was so genuine, both on her mouth and in her eyes, that Bert couldn't turn away. Lois noticed that he was staring at her. She wrestled with some inner dilemma before walking over to his booth.

Ahriman, she didn't look this good in real life. This is you trying to distract me.

"Excuse me," she said in a voice that was musical in its beauty. She gazed at Bert anxiously.

"Yes?"

"Is this seat taken?"

"Huh?"

"The only seats are at the bar, and I just don't want to sit up there. May I?"

"Sure."

Lois sat opposite Bert at the small booth. "I wouldn't feel comfortable at the bar," she added nervously. "People staring at me...." Her voice trailed off.

"You don't normally dress this way and you don't want strange men thinking you're looking for company," Bert completed. "It's fine, I wouldn't mind having someone nice to talk to for a little while anyway."

She seemed relieved and her face glowed as she smiled. "Oh, but I've

completely forgotten my manners. I'm Lois Preedom." She offered a hand.

"Bert Harper," he replied, barely catching himself before he said Himes. He shook her small, soft hand.

As Lois sat down, a waitress arrived at the booth.

"May I take your order?"

"That looks good," Lois said, indicating Bert's meal. "I'll have what he's having."

The waitress nodded and politely vanished to place the order.

Can I stop the meeting this way? Seduce Lois, or at least occupy her, so that Dad never approached her? No, that won't work. Killing them is a gesture. They're no more real than I'll be after the deed is done.

"So, Mr. Harper—" Lois began.

"Call me Bert."

"Okay, Bert. Call me Lois, then. Bert, do you come here often?" She blushed. "I'm sorry, but...."

"But what?"

"That sounded like a line. You know, like what you might say to me if you were trying to pick me up."

"I promise not to take it that way," he assured her. "Although, if you don't mind me saying so, I would be flattered if you were. You probably hear that all the time, though." He laughed his best nervous laugh. "Now it sounds like I'm trying to pick you up."

"Why would you?"

"Because you're beautiful."

If this were someone I didn't know before this night, if this was a woman I actually met somewhere, what would I do?

Bert asked himself the question, but he knew the answer. They'd become friends and perhaps even lovers. Or perhaps he'd become her friend for the sole purpose of becoming her lover.

After a minute, Ralph Frengleheimer quietly entered the restaurant and looked at the bar stools, then at the booths.

No women, his face said. There are no women here tonight. Except for that knockout over there, but she's taken. After a moment, he went to the bar.

"Bert. Bert."

Bert turned to Lois. "I'm sorry, what were you saying? I kind of drifted there."

"See someone you know?"

"Yes. Yes, I do. I'll be right back." Bert got to his feet and walked casually to the bar. "Ralph Frengleheimer."

Ralph turned to face him. "Do I know you?"

"No. But I know you."

Bert quickly put the pistol against his father's chest and pulled the trigger. He was startled by the loudness of the shot and the ringing in his

ears. Ralph fell to the floor with a hole in his chest.

Bert found himself lying on the floor. Ralph's bloody corpse was a few feet away. Off to one side was the pistol. Bert reached for it, but he could not move his arm. He looked down at his arm. It was dark brown. He was a black man.

"What in the hell—?" he began. He was surprised at the sound of his own voice. He sounded like someone else entirely, like an uneducated black man from the South.

"He's dead!" someone shouted. "That nigger shot him!"

Bert knew that he was the nigger, and that he'd killed Ralph.

"Ahriman! Damn you, what have you done?"

The bar turned quiet. No one was moving. Everything around Bert had stopped, like someone hitting pause on a videotape. After a moment, Ahriman appeared before him.

"My dear Mister Frengleheimer, you honestly don't know, do you? I am sorely disappointed. For the son I never had to miss something so obvious —"

"Don't call me that!"

"That was no compliment or insult, that was a clue. The son I never had. Think about it."

"I don't have time for these games, goddamn you!"

"God damned me long ago, Mister Frengleheimer. Or should I say Mister Lawson?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You killed Ralph Frengleheimer. What do you suppose happened to Lois Preedom?"

"I don't know, but I would have killed her next if you hadn't stopped me!"

"I didn't stop you, Mister Lawson. You did."

"What kind of shit are you trying to pull?"

"After Lois Preedom spent the day at the beach with her sister's children, she didn't choose to eat at Capone's because it happened to be nearby. There are other places on the beach. She was here to find a man."

"You're lying! She's not like that!"

"The woman practically threw herself at you. But then you got up and killed Ralph Frengleheimer. What do you think happened to her after that?"

"I don't know and I don't care. What happened to me?!"

"It's the same question. She left, distraught and whatnot, but she got over it. Those urges remained, as they do in all humans. And let us not forget, she is the parent with the womb. Perhaps you should have shot her first. But, you did not. So, after enough weeks and months had passed, she went to another bar. She met Skeebone Lawson and—"

"Who cares?!"

"You do. You were her firstborn child with Frengleheimer before you

killed him. Now you are her firstborn child with Lawson. She is, after all, your mother. But unfortunately, Lawson's seed was defective."

"You bastard!"

"You were born Rufus Lawson, to Skeebone and Lois Lawson, and you have sickle cell anemia. Lois is a carrier, so she must have a Negro ancestor somewhere. It seems that her husband, Skeebone, is also a carrier."

"You bastard!"

"Perhaps your mother should have stayed within her own race."

"You fucking bastard!!"

"Don't try lunging at me, you'll only hurt yourself. Just as you were killing Ralph Frengleheimer, a stranger, for reasons known only to yourself, you had a sickle cell seizure. I suppose it's too bad you spent so long chatting up the girl, now isn't it?"

"This isn't fair and you know it!"

"On the contrary, Rufus, it is extremely fair. If only you had gotten past the lady's charms and killed her first, you would have been able to kill Frengleheimer with the second shot and ended your sorry existence. Pity."

"No!"

"Now I will simply have to leave you here, at the mercy of the angry crowd, because you couldn't stand the thought of another rooster pecking at your prized hen."

"NO!!!"

"Does this mean you rescind the third wish?"

"Yes, dammit, that's what it means!"

"In that case, this never happened."

"No!" Bert noticed that he was Bert again, not Rufus. He got to his feet. "I can't just go live my life. I'll always be looking over my shoulder, for the demons in every corner who wait to pounce upon me and steal my joy."

"Even if they are never there?"

"Especially if they're never there! You know you've done this to me."

"What would you have me do?"

"Die!"

"Besides that."

"Again with the hard questions," Bert muttered. "I can think of nothing that will satisfy me so long as I exist. I ask you again for non-existence, oblivion, non-birth."

"I can't grant you that."

"You can't? Or you won't?"

"Does it matter?"

"If you can't undo my beginning, let's skip to my ending. I'm tired of jumping through hoops and I'm tired of being sent off with promises of no more hoops to jump through. I propose a final conflict, where one of us goes on and the other is no more."

"Surely you know who would win such a conflict."

"I would win because the conflict would be over."

DESCENT INTO MADNESS

Chapter Eight

Bert was driving north on a deserted stretch of 821, perhaps a bit too tired to be driving, when he swerved onto the shoulder. A man was walking along the highway, at night. Bert could barely see him, but he knew that this was David O'Neill. Bert swerved sharply away from O'Neill and stopped the car.

In a flash of insight, Bert understood all that had happened. In real life, he would have never killed O'Neill and kept driving. He would have beaten his wife, unfortunately, but he would never kill a man and just keep driving.

Bert stopped the car and O'Neill walked up to it. Both men were shaken by the episode.

"I almost didn't see you," Bert apologized as he opened his passenger side door. "My name's Bert Himes."

"David O'Neill. I ran out of gas back there."

"Get in and we'll find you a gas station."

O'Neill got in the old car and set his empty gas can in the back seat. Soon they were driving up Highway 821.

"Thanks," O'Neill said. "I don't know what I'd've done if you hadn't picked me up. People think Florida's always hot, but it sure gets cold at night this time of year."

"No problem."

"So what brings you out this way?"

"Convention in Fort Lauderdale. Political activists."

"Ah."

"Boring as hell. And you?"

"I was visiting the kids. My ex won custody."

"Where do you live?"

Please say something about Cochrane. No, don't.

"Tallahassee. I'm a professor at the college."

Bert nodded. "What do you teach?"

Please don't say criminal psychology.

"Economics. Boring, I know, but it pays the rent. What do you do?"

"I'm a psychologist in Tampa, but I'm going to try to get out of private practice and into criminal psychology. I do it part-time now."

"Exciting. But will it pay the rent?"

Bert laughed. "Barely."

"Seriously, do you know why economics professors become economics professors?"

"No. Why?"

"Because they don't know enough about economics to make themselves rich."

The small talk continued until they had reached a gas station and then returned to O'Neill's car. He was a nice guy, but he was nothing like the man Bert had killed in that other reality.

Back when Bert was 13, he met and battled Satan. The whole episode ended in such a way that someone could have mistaken it for a dream. Such a resolution was wholly unsatisfactory and it pissed him off.

Recently, Bert met and battled Ahriman. The whole episode ended in such a way that someone could have mistaken it for a dream. Such a resolution was wholly unsatisfactory and it pissed him off.

§

Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary watched Bert screw his wife.

For many years, it had been his fantasy to have sex inside a church, but his wife had always objected. Until now.

Bert lay on his back in a plush coffin between the altar and the marble statue within St. Mary's Catholic Church. Wendy lie naked atop him, stroking his rigid cock.

"This isn't happening," Bert stated. "I'm dreaming again."

Bert awoke in a cheap motel just off Highway 821. Only a fool drives until he almost kills a man, and only a bigger fool drives after he almost kills a man. After Bert had dropped off O'Neill, he'd stopped in the closest town and called it a night. It was 9:40 a.m. and he felt much better.

He thought about the wrong turns he'd made in his life. Ahriman had tricked him before into thinking that he had a second chance. He didn't believe it this time either, but he decided to act as if he did until the rules changed again.

Bert picked up the telephone and dialed Chris's number.

"Hi, Chris. This is Bert. It's over."

"What's over?"

"Us. It's over."

There was silence on the line.

"Goodbye," Chris said finally.

"Goodbye."

Bert hung up the phone. Guilty memories of guilty pleasures came back to him. He let them run their course and then he left the motel.

Several hours later, Bert saw the road sign that told him Tampa was eight miles away and that the next exit led to I-75 north. It was a familiar sight.

"Is life with Wendy truly pure hell? Or is there something there worth saving? Decide now, Bert. The exit's on the right."

He stayed on Highway 60 east, which led straight into Tampa.

"Maybe the woman's grown frigid because I've turned into an asshole. If we can't fix it, at least we can say we tried."

Bert turned on the car radio. The station was playing a song by Pink Floyd. "Day after day, love turns gray like the skin on a dying man. And night after night, we pretend it's all right, but I have grown older and you have grown colder and nothing is very much fun anymore."

Bert turned off the radio and kept driving.

§

Bert opened the door to his home. Wendy sat in a recliner, which she'd turned to face the front door. Her face was devoid of all expression. She wore only a loosely-bound robe, and a shotgun rested across her lap.

"Is it loaded?" he quietly asked.

Wendy nodded. "Five shells."

Bert was reminded of Terrence Howell.

"Part of me hoped that you would never come back," she continued.

"Part of me prayed that you would."

"I don't blame you if you shoot," Bert offered meekly. "I really shouldn't get angry because you screwed another man, because I made love to another woman."

"I know. She told me everything."

"She was here," Bert remembered.

"Yes, but it doesn't matter. I knew all along."

"How?"

"I'd have to be stupid not to notice."

"I called her before I got here. I've ended it."

Wendy sat in silence, watching him. She still appeared emotionless, but of course she was not. A dozen different emotions had to be boiling inside her, waiting to explode.

"Are you going to shoot me?"

"I don't know yet."

"When will you know?"

She didn't reply. Bert studied her face for a sign, but there was none. Finally he sat on the floor, cross-legged, before her.

"I love you," he said simply and he meant it. He didn't know if she believed him.

Bert dozed off at some point. When he woke up, Wendy was gone. The shotgun rested on the chair where she had been sitting.

Some time later, Bert got up and looked around the house. All of Wendy's belongings were gone. He'd known they would be.

Yes, this is how things would have really ended. But I know I didn't dream or imagine my battle with Ahriman. One day we will meet again. How

I wish that day were now.

DESCENT INTO MADNESS

Chapter Nine

Bert closed down his private practice to become a full-time criminal psychologist. It was with a newfound sensitivity that he tried to repair every broken psyche.

He spent several years trying to repair his own psyche. When he ended his counseling sessions, he didn't believe that he was cured. He simply believed they were no longer helpful and he took some comfort in the fact that there had been no further delusional episodes.

Bert never tried to pursue another relationship. He was content to live alone, helping as many people as he could while making sure he hurt no one. He couldn't say exactly when he came to accept this as his life again, only that he had.

Bert was sitting in a leather recliner in his office and a uniformed police officer was seated in a nearby chair. The cop had jet-black hair, a neat moustache, dark eyes, and a handsome tan face. He was younger than Bert, probably 25 or 30. He was taller than Bert, his posture was ramrod straight, and his muscles strained against his light blue shirt.

"My name's Bert Himes, like it says on the desk, but don't let all those certificates up there fool you. I'm just some guy that cops come visit when they need a non-cop to talk to and I'm probably crazier than most people."

"My name's Paul Poyntz. Let's stick with last names for now. I'm not exactly comfortable coming here."

"I'm never comfortable at first interviews either, Poyntz. Just don't call me Frengeheimer."

"Excuse me?"

"I shortened it to Himes. I couldn't even spell Frengeheimer until I was 16."

"Let's cut to the chase, Doc. I've got delusions of grandeur."

"Is this the diagnosis of another psychologist or just an educated guess on your part?"

"I think I am the devil of Persian mythology."

Bert's jaw dropped. "What?"

"I think I am Ahriman."

Paul Poyntz's appearance changed only subtly, but it was now Ahriman who sat before Bert.

"All the empathy in the world can't match the pleasure of seeing the expression on your face," Ahriman stated. "I wish you could see yourself."

"Ahriman?"

"Perhaps you'd like to lie on the couch and tell me about your problem,

Doctor Himes."

"Ahriman, what are you doing here?!"

"I was in the neighborhood and I thought I'd visit an old friend. Just to see how you're doing. I'd say you've done well for yourself."

"Why are you here?!"

"As I stated before, Jehovah wondered if a being who could do anything except defy him would have any freedom at all."

Bert rose to his feet and raged at Ahriman, pacing angrily across the room as he spoke.

"I can't believe this! For you to come back here after all this time for who the fuck knows what! This is my fucking life and you said you were done fucking with it! Or am I a kid who imagined the last 35 years now?!"

"You haven't imagined any of this, Bert. You're old now and with age sometimes comes wisdom."

"*So what the fuck do you want?!*"

"In olden times, rage drove men to war. Now it only drives them to obscenity. This is progress, my friend."

"You're no friend, Ahriman! Tell me what you want!"

"I am here because of what you want, Bert. Do you remember what you last told me that you wanted from me?"

"Of course I don't remember what I said to you last. I don't care what I said to you last. I only wish you'd leave and never come back."

"That's not what you said before, Bert. Can I quote you?"

"Can I stop you?"

Ahriman spoke in a voice that sounded strange to Bert because it was Bert's voice. "If you can't undo my beginning, let's skip to my ending. I'm tired of jumping through hoops and I'm tired of being sent off with promises of no more hoops to jump through. I propose a final conflict, where one of us goes on and the other is no more."

"Yeah, well, now it's just too damn late. All I want you to do is leave."

"Hear me out, old friend. This is all I ask. If you still want me to leave after I have spoken, I will be gone. Forever, if you wish it."

Bert sat in his recliner. "Fine. Talk."

"Do you bill by the hour?"

"Talk!"

"Long ago, Jehovah reputedly let a sinless man die to pay for the sins of all mankind. It's not true, but what if it were? That's part of the job description, now isn't it?"

"You're babbling."

"Not at all. I don't care what perfect men do because they are too rare for the data to be useful. Perfect men aren't just rare, they are non-existent. So let's talk about you instead."

"Very funny."

"Not only are you imperfect, but you are doomed. At the end of your

long and happy life waits eternal damnation because you rejected *Him*. He gave Moses Ten Commandments and you broke the first five just by either being an atheist or calling on me instead of *Him*."

"So I'm scum. What about it?"

"Will a sinner who is already doomed and who has nothing to gain see enough good in humanity to die for it? Bert, you know that you are scum. Is everyone?"

"What are you saying, Ahriman?"

"If you sacrifice yourself for whatever reason and then gain some reward for it, it proves nothing. I propose to kill you, but only if you are willing. If you do not accept, you are damned. If you do accept, you are still damned. How does it affect Bert Himes? It matters not one whit what you decide. But to the rest of humanity, it matters a great deal."

"You want me to die for humanity?"

"Precisely. What I have done to you, I can do to all mankind. It would amuse me greatly to watch you all go insane."

"No!"

"As a Christian, which you are not, the notion must surely offend you. As a psychologist, which you are, the notion may offend you even more. There is only one thing that will stop me from doing this."

"You want me to die."

"You are happy now, with a good life and a good measure of success. You would be giving all this up."

"You can go to Hell!"

"It is my home. To spell it out, I will unleash the inner demons of every man, woman and child on this planet unless you die for them. Will you do this? Do you see enough good in the rest of humanity to die for their sins?"

"How will you kill me?"

"I won't tell you that."

"How do I know you'll keep your end of the agreement?"

"Being dead, you will not know. But if you walk away and I do this evil deed, you will see what I can do. People walk around all the time claiming *the devil made me do it* when in fact I did not. But if I do start controlling what people do, could you bear to watch the results?"

"I'm insane," Bert decided. "Completely insane."

"You can believe that if you wish. As you watch everyone around you destroy themselves in an orgy of chaos, you can try to convince yourself it is only delusion and hallucination."

"I truly hate you, Ahriman."

"I am the devil, Bert Himes. I am meant to be hated. This feels so Biblical, doesn't it? I offer you, a lowly mortal of no consequence, the chance to save all humanity by dying for it. Be honored by this."

"For my third wish, repent before Almighty God and beg His

forgiveness for all your many sins."

Ahriman smiled. "You don't even have your first two wishes, Bert. You look much like you did before you dreamed that pubescent dream and your mind is woefully average. You've even lost the questioning spirit."

"Now that's a lie."

"But my terms are not. Die for the sins of humanity or watch those sins destroy them."

"I'd forgotten just how much I hate you."

"Perhaps you should think of your own comfort in this. We both know that humanity is worthless. You are selfish creatures, seeking pleasure and avoiding pain and fighting to keep from going insane. Surely you agree there is not enough good in humanity to die for it."

"No, I don't agree. We might be flawed, but we do still have value." He paused. "Can I have a stiff drink first?"

Ahriman's smile seemed almost tender. "I will even drink a toast with you." Glasses of brandy appeared in both their hands.

"To mankind," Bert said. "His presence in the universe makes it a richer place."

"I should make you drink that toast alone."

"You think so little of us?"

"Actually, I find your species quite intriguing. But I would not die for it."

DESCENT INTO MADNESS

Chapter Ten

The sun beat down upon Bert's red and naked body without mercy. Rocks stabbed at his bare bloody feet with each step. The weight upon his back grew heavier, making every muscle in his body ache, as the hill became harder to climb. Upon his head was a crown of thorns.

The weight that Bert bore was a huge wooden cross. It was tied to his wrists and the ropes dug into his flesh. His back was full of splinters. Roman soldiers prodded him on with spears while hundreds of onlookers laughed and jeered. The soldiers were merciless and Bert could not move fast enough for them.

With each step, Bert knew, Ahriman wanted him to reconsider his decision. With each step, he did reconsider his decision. He didn't know how high Ahriman would make this hill. But he did know that, like Sisyphus, each step would only strengthen his resolve.

Finally they were there. The soldiers held Bert in place as they placed a long metal spike against his left palm and produced a heavy hammer. He tried to steel himself to the pain, but there was no way he could prepare for it. The spike cut through his hand, ripping muscles and tendons and ligaments. Blood spurted out from open arteries that burned in their pain.

It has been said that a body can grow numb to pain. This is a lie. With each blow of the hammer, with each spike that was driven into his body, Bert cried and screamed and struggled to break free.

The ropes were cut from his wrists and the cross was raised. A spike in each palm and one through Bert's abdomen supported the weight of his body. There was something similar to a chair against his butt, its sole purpose to keep him alive longer. By prolonging Bert's life, Ahriman also prolonged Bert's pain.

Crucifixion is a slow death. It is an ugly death. It is a painful death. The body starves and the pain intensifies. Hunger pains merge with abdominal pains to multiply one another. Dehydration in the hot cruel sun is the usual cause of death and it can take days to die this way.

While spectators spat and urinated on Bert's dying body, Ahriman showed him visions of what his life could be if he chose not to die. The Biblical tale says that Satan tried to tempt Jesus into giving up his martyrdom. *I am no Jesus!* But Ahriman tempted him likewise.

With every ragged breath that he struggled to take, Bert cursed Ahriman for doing this to him. He cursed Jehovah for creating Ahriman. He cursed his own body for refusing to black out from the pain or to die from something, anything.

DESCENT INTO MADNESS

Epilogue

On July 8, 2005, Annette Springer had a son. He weighed six pounds and 11 ounces. Annette didn't know who the father was, but she didn't care. She knew only joy. She named her son Ernest.

Ernest Springer also knew joy. He knew little else, only confusion. His only memories were of the womb and the birth canal and now this blinding light and strange voices and the smiling figure of his mother.

He didn't know that he'd lived before. At the end of each life, the essence of what he was left his body and found another.

Ernest Springer didn't know his own name. He didn't know that, in his most recent previous life, his name had been Englebert Frengleheimer.

He didn't know that Ahriman was watching him. When the time was right, he would visit Ernest again. Ahriman looked forward to that time.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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When Mamie Jo Hill was a young virgin, a doctor assured her she could never get pregnant. After seeing her firstborn son, she wished he'd been right. Little Michael was dumb as a brick, and he had a face that could sink 1000 ships, a face that could make a freight train take a dirt road. A quick peek at <http://www.michaeledits.com/> will establish that, unlike a fine wine, I have not improved with age.

As I got older, I learned to compensate for my lack of ability by BSing my way through life. 1982 WHO'S WHO IN AMERICAN WRITING. Four books published in 2002, one in 2004, another in 2005. Three EPPIE finalists. Won some Reviewer's Choice Awards at Sime~Gen. One of WRITERS DIGEST's Top 101 Websites For Writers. And all without a lick of talent.

Now I work and live in Asia, where I can BS to my heart's content.

But I'm not all bad. My cat really loves me. My wife loves me too, but she doesn't know any better because she's Australian.