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Fetus: An Exploration of Human Nature Through the Issue of Abortion

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FETUS: AN EXPLORATION OF HUMAN NATURE THROUGH
THE ISSUE OF ABORTION

A culminating project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts in Humanities

by
Grant Dinsdale
San Rafael, California
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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the Master's program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of Graduate Humanities department in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in Humanities with a Creative Writing Emphasis. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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Abstract

The issue of abortion touches deep emotions in individuals and continues to be a controversial topic in the United States. The Right to Life movement believes strongly that life begins at conception, and to abort an unborn fetus is an act of murder. The supporters of the Pro-Choice movement, however, believe that a woman has the right to choose what happens with her body, and this takes precedence over other considerations. This work of fiction uses the above controversy as its framework. The primary narrator is a fetus in utero who tells the story of how his father and mother arrive at his conception, and how their complicated circumstances threaten his future birth. These are the first five chapters of a larger work in progress, and thus deal with exposition and the development of the protagonist, Daniel Ernst, the father of the narrator and a very confused human being.

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Chapter 1

“Reality programs, America’s freak show.”

Daniel clicked through channel after channel, the intermittent flash of the TV reflecting off his face, off his reclining pajama-clad figure, off the slip-covered couch, illuminating the bare, white walls of the Ernst family living room.

“Crap, crap, crap, crap, crap.”

He’s wearing make up. He cannot sing. Crap. Fat people, *teams* of fat people. Get off that scale and go find your dignity. All crap. How many versions of *Law and Order* can there be. Of *CSI*? Good lord, bodies sliced open like frogs in biology class. More celebrity gossip ... You’re fired ... Flavor Flav ... money and a TV show are the only ways women are ever going to line up for *that* guy – *boooooooooo!*

He raises his thumb from the remote for a moment to watch a twenty-something blonde hand her wedding ring over to host Joe Rogan, who drops it into a tray of writhing maggots two-inches-deep. The woman, who is supposed to retrieve her ring with her teeth, turns to her newlywed husband and bursts into tears.

“That is just cruel. No wonder they canceled *Fear Factor*,” and his thumb lowers back down to the arrow key.

Friends, Frasier, Home Improvement – the same canned laughter over and over again. I don’t speak Chinese. Or Spanish for six channels in a row. Aren’t these what the higher digits are for?

He pauses. On the screen, a woman, plump but shapely, struggles up a dirt walkway in near darkness. Her high heels and mid-thigh skirt make the going more difficult than it should, and she drags a suitcase behind her, its wheels incapable of

navigating the uneven surface. A man in tight faded jeans and a large cowboy hat stands in front of an unpainted single-story home with his two children. The man and woman greet. He smiles without opening his mouth, she flashes a brilliant wall of white. The cowboy shakes her hand and prods the boy and girl to do the same, to which they comply in the half-hearted manner of children.

A flash and the screen overlooks a suburban neighborhood, zooming in quickly to a two story home not much different from its neighbors. It is midday, and a different man and two children stand knobby-kneed in matching Bermuda shorts on a deep green roll-out lawn, a smile with the same intense whiteness as the previous woman's is plastered upon their faces. Down the concrete walkway a tall woman with a cowboy hat and boots strides towards the awaiting glare of teeth. Another round of handshakes, these trained and well rehearsed. Then the camera pulls away, the screen splits to the two families, the images of the two women interchange, the music swells, it is time for "WIFE SWAP!!!"

Daniel raised an eyebrow and his trigger thumb relaxed. True, another reality show, he thought, but what an intriguing premise ...

Fifty-five minutes later, after the many expected conflicts, abuses, reconciliations and reunions, the two reassembled families meet to discuss the experience. An argument erupts between the women, the suburbanite raises his voice, and the cowboy throws a table in the air. He comes after his counterpart with raised fists, landing a punch on the cheek of the terrified office furniture salesman before the studio staff and frantic wives

can pull him back. Switch to a later interview of the salesman (in a much braver state) threatening to, “sue the Wranglers off that crazy redneck.”

Daniel turned off the TV and sat in the darkness of his living room, waiting for the glow of the screen to fade. He was tired, and staying up to watch a reality show, a genre he had cursed just seconds before, did not help matters. Rubbing his eyes with the palms of his hands, he looked through the scattering tingles toward the stairway. The snores from upstairs descended halfway, only to be sucked back up to the second floor. Back and forth, back and forth, the sound lifted him off the couch and up the stairs.

The second floor hallway was a cacophony of congested breathing. Louder in the boys’ room, softer past his daughter Rachel’s, but nothing compared to the deep rumble coming from the bedroom he shared with his wife Emily.

She lay on her side, bare shoulders exposed, one leg out and on top of the crumpled bedspread. Her mouth was wide open and her lips stretched down toward the pillow like two half-inflated inner tubes. In through the nose, out through the mouth, the snores ebbed and flowed.

He kicked off his slippers and got into bed, trying to keep the fog of drowsiness that surrounded him intact, but within a minute he was fully awake. The snoring, the dull hum of the heater, two tiny red lights of charging cell phones on the armoire, streetlights diffused by thin slats of window blinds – they all conspired against sleep. These and the plague of thoughts. Thoughts of work, of PG&E politics, off-hand remarks from Gary, his boss, of the cold secretaries and bookkeepers frozen in their cubicles like cubes in an ice tray. Thoughts of the day, another Saturday come and gone, the list of chores done and not, the demands of fatherhood (some met, some not), projects, and finally, the lure

of the television. Thoughts of tomorrow, of church, of his neglected prayer book, of the new pastor and his indifference, of where to stand during the coffee hour, and more importantly, whom to avoid.

A cough came from the other side of the bed. Emily turned on her back and blinked at the ceiling. He knew they both thought it at the same time: Saturday night. No pressures of a workday trailing them to bed, and no invasive alarm clock to suck them out of their morning slumber. Just each other and the sense of mutual expectation.

Of obligation.

They both lay there for several moments, moments that dispelled any illusion of spontaneity. Emily turned on her side and put her arm across the chest of her husband.

“How was TV-land?”

Though awake, he tried his best mumble.

“Okay, some stupid show . . . reality shows . . .” He let his voice trail off.

“Mmmph.” Her forehead nuzzled his shoulder.

What to do? he thought. The mood was . . . maybe there. Maybe not. It *was* kind of late and the day had not exactly been an inspiring one. But she might resent him if he didn't, something in the vein of you don't even act like you want me anymore, which was absolutely positively not true, dammit. He was just always so *tired*, not like a few years ago. Maybe this was the curse of his thirties. It was a rare morning these days when he'd wake up and have to hide the tent pole in his pajamas as he hobbled quickly to the bathroom. And look at her, he thought, she's already halfway back to a snore, practically drooling on my elbow. It certainly wasn't all up to him – where was *her* desire? She'd been asleep for a couple of hours before he even got here for Christ's sake.

And there his line of thinking halted. A whistle blew, well-familiar but not yet old, that stopped further blasphemy. For he knew this was not the way to think of his wife to whom he was now not once, but twice committed, to whom he was commanded to love and cherish, to whom it was his duty to demonstrate his love.

He thought of the television show, of both pairs of husbands and wives and the ecstatic greetings they gave their spouses when they returned to their true homes. The interlude of separation had made the familiarity of what each couple had that much more divine. What those couples must have shared together when they finally returned to their intimate domain ...

With his free hand, Daniel caressed the arm of his wife. She stirred and nuzzled closer, as if she too had followed the same line of reasoning in her sleep. He turned to her and, after an unintended encounter with her nose, found her dry yet partially expectant lips.

For Christ's sake, he would do it.

He would do it.

Afterthought Prologue

or

Greetings from a cluster of cells

And he did it, too.

He's done it before and he'll do it again.

That's my dad for you. Always trying. Always willing to give it his best shot.

Well, at least a shot.

Three of his "shots" are asleep down the hall while he and Emily do what they feel must be done.

They named them: Max, Rachel and Skyler, provided them with a home, rooms, things to eat, things to do with the time they've been given.

These *are* the greatest gifts, aren't they? A place to be and a time to be it.

Aren't they?

The fact is, I wouldn't know. I just float here. I have parts, or at least I will, but right now they, too, are floating. At the moment they happen to be in different places, and I'm waiting for them to come together. It's okay, really.

It's all okay. It is just a matter of time before they come together. When they do, and they *will*, then I will have space.

The space where Daniel, Emily, Max, Rachel and Skyler reside is a modest two-story home on the western curve of a cul de sac – 2114 Larksmeade Circle, to be exact. They live in an older suburb of Chico, California, in a country called the United States of

America on the North American continent of planet earth, which orbits the sun, a star found in the Milky Way galaxy.

It is now 12:37am, the very early morning of May 25, 2007, technically still night. Daniel (for he is not yet my father) has just had an orgasm, an experience for which he is always grateful, and rolled back to his side of the bed. Emily's breath slows from its crescendo minutes ago when she, too, thankfully experienced the female version of the same. Her hand reaches sideways and rests on Daniels shoulder. Soon they are both asleep.

If I look closely, I can see the 4,626,853 sperm as they swim up the vaginal canal toward her uterus, their numbers dropping by the second as the weaker ones perish, returning to the great cloud.

Time and space, they *must* be gifts, mustn't they?

Chapter 2

“Let us all bow our heads and praise God. Praise God to the highest.”

Daniel sat on the cold wooden pew of the Newly Reformed Grace Baptist Church with his family and obeyed. To his left were his wife and two year old son Skyler. Max, age nine, and Rachael, seven, sat to his right. A quick glance from his reverently inclined head showed his two older children in similar states of discomfort as they attempted to feign an interest in prayer. Max did a better job of it, with his bowed head and moving lips, but his darting eyes gave him away. Rachel’s legs swung with an impatient rhythm, and her long brown hair hid a face that was, no doubt, far from pious.

His wife was having a tough time of things, courtesy of Skyler. They had been there just over forty minutes and her supply of goldfish was running low. Daniel’s youngest son had looked every bit the young gentleman in his grey Sunday suit as they walked out the front door this early spring morning, but by now he had revealed his true two-year-old nature: shirt untucked, front soaked and stained an orange-ish yellow, clip-on tie crumpled and forgotten underneath the pew. He held a yellow Hot Wheels roadster in his chubby hand, using his legs and various parts of his mother as a racetrack. This she tolerated as long he kept the noisy wheels off the surface of the bench and refrained from humming the ferocious sound of the engine that roared in his imagination.

“Dear God, we ask you for forgiveness for our sins. We pray to make ourselves worthy of your one begotten son, whom you sent for our salvation . . .”

Daniel closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on the words. This was his time to commune with God, to be truly grateful for the life he had, for the family who sat with

him, for the bounty they enjoyed. Did he not have a beautiful home? Well, he thought, maybe not beautiful in terms of *Better Homes and Gardens* beautiful, but it was solid, attractive. A good mow on the lawn when they got home would give it a fresh look, hopefully draw away attention from the peeling paint on the trim. The bushes, whose name he still had not researched after living there for three years, needed a clipping too. What were they called? He could look it up in the garden book, but that would take time, leafing through the pictures over and over again. Be easier just to take a small branch to the nursery, they'd know. Could pick up some snail bait too –

“ . . . We, who have transgressed on our neighbors, who often stray from the path of virtue and kindness, ask that you look upon us with your gentle, loving eyes, and forgive . . . ”

Yes, back to God. God. Do not stray. No more straying. Be thankful for our home and all its imperfections. Nothing is perfect. No one's house is perfect. Ours isn't in too bad of shape for being thirty years old. Neighborhood's okay too. Sure, he had wanted a new home in a new development, like the one out near Holcomb Park, but the cost, holy Christ. And it had only gotten worse, bound to get even more. No, he should be thankful.

How, he wondered, did that family last night afford such a home? An office furniture salesman can't make *that* much money. Their mortgage payment had to be over three thousand a month. In-fucking-credible! No wonder they had agreed to be on television. And that wife of his . . .

Church, he thought, I'm in church. Got to stick with God. God, please forgive me these thoughts . . .

“ . . . and so Lord we thank you for this day, in Jesus name, amen.”

Daniel raised his head, both thankful that the prayer was over and ashamed he could not stay with it. Why was this becoming so hard to do lately? He empathized with his restless children, but it was his idea to make them come every Sunday. It was part of his new devotion, a devotion that was now almost four years old. A devotion that was becoming . . . well, boring.

“It is now time for us to acknowledge our neighbors, to greet them on this beautiful Sunday morning that God has given us, and to ask them for forgiveness for our transgressions.”

They stood. He shook hands with Rachel and Max, directing them with his eyes to please do the same to the people around them. Lisa Nettles, a forty-ish woman, turned and shook his hand with her fingertips, not looking him in the face, smiling instead at his wife. He turned and shook hands with an elderly lady behind him whom he did not know, before turning back to Emily, who was obviously more popular than he. Daniel tried to give her a look of bemusement, but her hand barely gripped his before she was tugged down by a red-faced Skyler in desperate need of a fix from his sippy-cup.

They sat, and after the collection plate was passed, the children, minus Skyler, who was too young, left for Sunday school. Their new pastor, Reverend Mark Salter, approached the podium and began the day’s sermon.

“I’d like to talk today about the sixth commandment. Does anyone here know which commandment is the sixth?”

Murmurs rose throughout the hall. Thou shalt not steal? Bear false witness? Covet thy neighbor’s wife?

“Kill,” the pastor clarified, “Thou shalt not kill.”

He let the silence settle on the last word.

“It is an obvious commandment, one that needs no elaboration, or at least it shouldn’t. Everyone knows that it is a sin to commit murder, that taking the life of another human being is a violation not only of the victim, but a violation of God himself, because when a human being is killed, a creation of God is destroyed, a creation that was made in the very image of God. And there can be no greater sin than this.”

Reverend Salter looked out on the faces of his congregation to confirm that this was more than obvious. A short whine came from the middle of the room from a little blonde-haired boy as he burrowed his head under his mother’s arm. Emily hid her annoyance under the pastor’s gaze.

“But I stand before you today to talk about that very thing. Because killing is something that happens everyday. I’m not just talking about the kind that you hear about on the evening news or read about in the papers. Not the kind where some fanatical lunatic straps a bomb to his chest and goes and blows himself up a market in the middle east, though these are horrific tragedies. I am talking about the kind of murder we never, ever, hear about. The kind that happens every day all across America. The kind that happens every day in the great state of California. The kind that happens right here in our city, in our beloved community, with not a single headline, not even a story buried back on page six of the *Chico Record*.

“This kind of murder doesn’t even warrant a single obituary. No one prays for the souls of these victims, because no one knows about them, that they even existed. They are a secret.”

Murmurs. People shift uncomfortably in their seats. Another whine. From the midsection.

“Yes indeed ladies and gentlemen. Secrets. And what is even more insidious is that these murders are kept quiet by the very institutions that you and I trust to keep us safe and to keep us healthy. I am speaking of the medical community, of nurses and doctors, maybe some who have helped you or me in a time of need. They keep these murders secret. And our government, from the feds all the way down to our own municipal officials, they conspire to keep these crimes from us.”

Daniel, whose attention had finally been caught by the words of this man, felt a feather-like touch on his knee. Skyler’s plump, pink face looked up at him imploringly. He gently lifted his son onto his lap.

A man in the back of the room gave several muffled coughs before clearing his throat loudly, interrupting the long pause so carefully planned by Reverend Salter.

“Now I know we here in the United States pride ourselves on free thinking. We hold with deep reverence our right to hold and defend our own opinions. I understand that. I believe it. I practice it myself as an American. On most issues, if we differ in our views, we can agree to disagree. That’s alright. It’s a good thing, a healthy thing.

“But as a Christian, as a God-loving, God-fearing man, a believer in the Bible, in the Ten Commandments, in the words of God and the teachings of Jesus Christ our savior, there can be no other way to see it. Abortion. Is. Murder. Plain and simple. There is no way around it.

“Life, my friends, begins at conception. That’s why we call it that, because a new life has been conceived. The moment the sperm burrows into the egg and fertilization

occurs, a new life has begun. Not by us – though we, uh, contribute willingly to the process . . . “

The reverend smiles, the audience chuckles.

“ . . . but by God. God, the great mover and the great creator sees fit to bless us with his most magnificent creation – life. Life is bestowed upon this small bundle of cells, and these cells grow and reproduce and before you know it there are little arms and legs and a great big old head and when your doctor listens closely with that stethoscope, what do you think he hears?”

“A heartbeat!” shouts the coughing man from the back of the room, followed by murmurs of assent.

“That is correct my friend. A heartbeat. And that is the heartbeat of a baby. A living human being. A precious child. A gift from God.”

A tickle runs up Daniel’s arm. He looks down at the pudgy hand moving the car along the plaid, road-like pattern of his sleeve. Skyler looks up and smiles at his daddy and for Daniel it is all blue eyes and blonde hair and pink cherub cheeks with a row of little white teeth gleaming up at him and he just can’t stand the majesty of it all. His son. His precious child. His gift from God.

“But there are those who have persuaded themselves otherwise, who use a twisted form of reason to circumvent this inconvenient truth. Should a woman have the right to choose what happens to her body? Of course she should. But if that woman chooses to use her body to, say, stab a defenseless, wheelchair-bound grandmother to death, there are consequences. That woman will go to jail for murder.

The reverend paused to take a sip of water.

“And yet, dear friends, our laws allow her to kill the unborn. Our laws allow her to go out and find an assassin in the medical community under the guise of ‘counseling,’ and ‘family planning.’ She can meet with a number of ‘professionals,’ sit in their clean, white offices and tell her sad, sad story about how it just isn’t the right time to have a baby. And then these ‘professionals’ will send her to a doctor, someone who has intensely studied the science of medicine for years, who has taken the Hippocratic oath to defend life, to fight off illness and death at all costs, and, to directly quote, ‘not give to a woman an abortive remedy.’ And this doctor, apparently in clear conscience and with no sense of moral, ethical wrongdoing, will perform the gruesome, bloody, and murderous procedure we all know of as an abortion.

“This is not news to you my friends. Of this I am well aware. You are all intelligent, well-informed people. You know about the world. You know about its evils. And most of these evils are beyond our power. Abortion is just one of those many things we all file away under ‘Not My Business,’ or ‘Beyond My Control,’ and then go on about our daily lives.”

He took another sip from the glass. Down in the pews, Skyler nestled his head against his father’s chest.

“Well I for one don’t feel comfortable with this anymore. Frankly, I never have. As a human being, a Christian, and a man of God, I can no longer let this stand. How many babies were murdered last week? Last month? In the past year? And right here in our little city, not two miles away from this very church, this goes on, this slaughter of the innocents. I would like to know how many babies we have let die while we carry on in silence! Does anyone here know?”

Another long, hushed pause. Daniel shifted uncomfortably in his seat, causing another whine to emanate from his son. Reverend Salter smiled gently.

“Well said my little friend. Thank you for that reminder. You see ladies and gentlemen, it is of the children I speak, and it for the children that I will act, and I ask you to join me. Pastor John Freeman from the First Christian Church and Father Fernando Rivera from Saint John the Baptist have asked me to join them in their efforts to permanently shut down the Planned Parenthood clinic here in Chico. We met and discussed our options, and we are forming a plan of action. These plans involve a series of frequent, peaceful, highly visible protests outside the clinic. We will distribute pamphlets and offer our own counselors to anyone on their way into that facility. We will let these women know that there are other more humane, more Christian options. We will let them know that they are free to choose life!”

The congregation erupted with applause. People rose to their feet, Daniel among them, holding Skyler above his head who, shocked at finding himself above such a large chopping of hands, reached down and cried for his mother, who remained seated with her head bowed. Out of the corner of his eye, Daniel spotted movement. A few people, two or three couples maybe, were exiting the pews with shaking heads and downcast eyes.

“I am asking for any and all of you to join with us for the cause. Of course this is a voluntary action, but if you are interested, there will be a meeting in the hall at 1pm, directly after the ladies auxiliary luncheon. If you can’t make it, sign the list outside and mark your calendars for the meeting this Tuesday. Thank you!”

The service ended with the closing hymn, a rowdy and rapturous “Onward Christian Soldiers” that felt different from any previous recitation. Daniel beamed as he

greeted Reverend Salter, shaking his hand and thanking him for such a moving sermon. He found Emily in the narthex holding a sweaty, sleeping Skyler.

“Let’s get the kids and go. That was exhausting,” she said through the stranglehold of her unconscious child.

“Go? And miss the . . . the, the luncheon? C’mon we have to eat. And that sermon was just incredible, wasn’t it? I mean, can’t you just feel it all the way out here?”

“I’m not sure what I’m feeling besides fatigue. He really gave it to me today,” she said, her eyes turned toward the son drooped over her shoulder. “And all that talk about murder, it just didn’t seem like church.”

“But don’t you see, it wasn’t about murder. It was about salvation, about saving, saving . . . you know, lives. Babies.”

They were outside now, and Daniel turned his head to the line of people at the entrance to the church hall.

“I don’t know Emily, I feel like I haven’t felt for a long time, like when we first started coming here with pastor Rick. Like there’s a real purpose to it.”

She shifted Skyler to her other shoulder and looked at her husband with concern. “Purpose? Do you think there’s been no purpose to coming here?”

“No, no. It’s not like that. Finding God and this church changed everything, you know that. It’s just that, well, you know, it’s gotten a bit . . . routine.”

“Honey, we’ve done everything you’ve asked, followed you here, joined in, become a part of the community. And now you tell me it’s routine? What more do you want?”

Daniel squinted into the sun and thought.

“I want this. This feeling. I don’t know, like service, like it means something. Like those women, they just don’t know what they’re doing. I feel like if we could just tell them, make them see. All of us together doing something that mattered. You, me, the kids, we could be saving other kids, the tiniest ones, give them a chance.”

Emily stood silently in front of her husband, casting her shadow across his lower torso. Skyler whimpered limply in her arms, sat up and looked at her. “I hungwy,” he said.

“Okay, you’re right, we’ve got to eat. Let’s go in and find Max and Rache. You save us a table, I’ll get in line. But if that meeting goes past 1:30, you can find your own ride home.”

Daniel grabbed her by the elbow and kissed the bangs that clung to her sweaty forehead. “Thank you,” he said, and led her towards the church hall.

Interlude

Somehow this all feels too abrupt, as if I've pushed you out midstream like baby Moses in his floating wicker basket, a poor orphan who has never seen nor had any knowledge of Lake Victoria.

You see, you may be finding my father to be a bit of an ass, which is true, but only as far as it is true for all humans past the age of five or six months. Once those neurons start growing and adapting to outside stimuli, a certain type of perfection is lost. The eternal old must be pushed aside for the temporally new, and one form of consciousness is replaced by another. Who is to say which is better? It's as unanswerable as the old chicken-and-the-egg argument, which, incidentally, completely discounts the rooster (and quite unfairly in my opinion). And the rooster brings us back to dear old dad.

So let us swim upstream like my noble yet doomed half brothers of the previous evening. This stream is not the Nile, nor the vaginal canal, but the stream of time, back to the year of our Lord, one-thousand-nine-hundred-ninety.

Chapter 3

“Psst! Hey, you gotta a license for those shoes?”

What the hell, thought Daniel, I’ve been in this school for five days with not a word from anyone, and someone has to give me crap about my shoes?

“They must be self propelled, or guided by remote,” mumbled the voice behind him.

Daniel was really hating Chico, and now, even more, Chico High.

“The mystery lies in the pump action, like walking on balloons.”

His head turned, his face wearing the most seriously irritated expression he could muster, and gave the gangly teenager behind him the stare. Only he didn’t catch his eye at first, because the young man was gazing intently at Daniel’s shoes, and when he realized Daniel was laying into him with an evil glare, the mumbling stopped and he looked directly into the eyes of his accuser, raising one eyebrow in a Spock-like expression. Daniel turned back to the front of the class, furrowed his brow and tried to concentrate on Mr. Fulmer’s lecture on algebraic variables.

“That’s it – the air! Pure-energy thoughts charge the miniature atmosphere, creating a chamber of remote consciousness, thus allowing conscious control from the cerebral cortex down to the podial devices, circumventing all physical neural pathways. Telepathic, atmospheric, bipedal mobility!”

The voice was now barely audible, speaking only to itself, but he had leaned in so close it was louder to Daniel than the teacher’s drone.

He turned around quickly and, startled, the youth popped back into his seat, assuming a look of intense concentration. His coarse, dirty-blond hair sprouted wildly

from a spot directly above his forehead and was left long in the back. Green eyes peered from behind a slightly bulbous nose that emerged awkwardly from the center of his long, sporadically pimples face.

“What I mean is,” Carl continued, “wouldn’t it be rad if you could walk by telepathically moving your shoes, which would lead your feet instead of through the normal neural network?”

“Are you making fun of my Air Jordans?”

“Mister Ernst,” Mr. Fulmer’s voice cut in from the front of the room, “if you would be so kind as to turn around, I will continue.”

This annoying adolescent, whom Daniel would come to know as Carl Mettinger, soon to be his best friend, raised both eyebrows towards the teacher with a look of intellectual innocence. Daniel gave him a frown, turned around, and once again attempted to untangle the enigmatic qualities of algebraic variables.

Later, Daniel scooped his two arms into the straps of his well-worn backpack and gently shut the door of his locker. He walked down the hall and out the doors into the warm Indian summer. Kids were gathered in groups small and large, chatting and laughing, a last bit of social competition before heading home. Daniel weaved his way through these groups, consciously keeping his head up to make eye contact with anyone who would, if only for moment, knowing to keep it short to avoid appearing desperate or

creepy. Being the new guy at school took some skill, and Daniel was well versed in its ways.

He reached the sidewalk and turned right down First Avenue, a group of younger boys about 20 yards ahead of him. He lowered his head and watched the lines in the concrete pass under his feet, slipping quickly into the meditation of another long walk home, into the thoughts of a sixteen-year-old boy used to being alone.

Daniel liked Chico about as much as he liked the swollen red pustules that occasionally pock-marked his face. Outbreaks of these gifts of adolescent pubescence usually occurred right after moving to a new city which, thanks to his father, happened at least once a year. He was sure it was the nervousness of meeting new people, of setting up a new social identity, of not getting his ass kicked by some hometown maniac who caught him walking across the “seniors only” lawn or some other such nonsense . . . it was these stressors that made his skin oil up and the whiteheads play peek-a-boo in the bathroom mirror.

At least it’s better than Vegas, he thought. That was the last city they had come from, and it was pretty much a disaster by anyone’s standards. He remembered their last night there, being woken up at three in the morning by the face of his mother that bore that all too familiar expression of worry. Worry mixed with resignation.

“Daniel, honey, we need to leave.”

“Where?” No need for why.

“We’re not exactly sure. California. It’s a nice big state. Come on now, we need to hurry.”

Clothes stuffed into pillowcases. Three boxes for books, CD's, tapes, a soccer trophy from seventh grade, and other knick-knacks he'd managed to hold onto over the years. *A rolling stone gathers no moss*. Sixteen was too young to be living an aphorism.

His father was in the living room of their apartment, tossing the contents of the bookshelves into a stained lettuce crate. The right side of his face was swollen and bruised, and the openings of both nostrils were caked in blood. He straightened up his paunchy frame and looked at his son. They stared at each other for a moment in silence, and then Daniel dropped his pillowed wardrobe on the floor and went back into his room – now former room – to retrieve the three remaining boxes of his life.

Another bad scrape. What was his father thinking, moving to Las Vegas, the west-coast capital of sin and vice? Usually when they were on the run Matthew's repentant side kicked in and he would look for somewhere safe, somewhere he thought might be morally pure, like the year and a half they spent in Oklahoma City, the most rural urban area they had ever lived in. There wasn't much of a demand for taxis, and Matthew had a hard time supporting his family. But he managed to keep himself out of trouble, or at least away from it, and Daniel had prospered from the stability. This was the year he earned his soccer trophy. This was the year he had not just one or two, but a group of friends. This was the year of the Shield of Faith Baptist Church, the last time he could watch his father exercise his deeply religious beliefs without the overriding cynicism that would come later.

It was also the year that they had to move not because they were on the run, but because of poverty. The citizens of Oklahoma City were wedded to their Fords and Chryslers, even at night after the bars closed, and this kept Matthew both idle and poor.

Unable to make rent, too proud for food stamps, and engendered with the belief that a wife's place – Isabel's place – was in the home, the Ernst family packed up and moved south to Houston, Texas.

The group of freshmen in front of him turned left at the corner and crossed the street, one boy running ahead and performing an impressive leapfrog over a mailbox to the whoops of encouragement from his friends. Daniel kept his steady forward pace and stepped off the curb.

Ah yes, Houston, thought Daniel. Rednecks and pollution. The cruelty of middle school kids and their concrete-cowboy mentalities, little Christians without the compassion. And his father slipped right back into the old patterns, as if his sinful side was what had been starved the most in the poverty of Oklahoma. Working nights, driving the drunks home, it wasn't long until he joined them in their reveries. In the beginning, Matthew would always tell his son about how he was trying to help these poor souls find their way back to God. But God had his own tricks, evidently. Going in to pick up a client, Matthew would sometimes sit down and wait for the slouching gentleman to finish his drink. Engaging in conversation, he might order one for himself. Just one. Fast forward one or two months, and Daniel's father can be found in the back rooms shooting dice and betting his tips for the night, tips that had yet to be earned.

What was it in Houston? Gambling debts? A wrecked cab on the sidewalk? Or was it one of the times his dad had disappeared for days, only to stumble home stinking and unshaven from some darkened wino's apartment? Daniel couldn't remember. He had lived in no less than fourteen different homes by the age of sixteen and the sins of his

father had begun to blur together like the lines of the freeway as they traveled from one city to the next.

On the long drive north Daniel's father told them how Chico was a quiet little city, a place where they could finally settle down. Things would be different here, he promised.

And it went smoothly, all things considered. They were out of a hotel and into an apartment after just two days. They found a good church, and his father landed a job with University Taxi, the night shift, the best paying shift. They enrolled Daniel into Chico High, a good school, Matthew was sure. His mom had soon finished unpacking, transforming the white-walled apartment into their home, the same home that always seemed to pop out of a box every year or so.

The same home, he realized as he stopped in the middle of a long expanse of suburban sidewalk, that would be stuffed back into cardboard darkness soon enough, because really, nothing was ever different. Not ever.

The afternoon heat was dry and oppressive. He could see the waves radiate in the distance off the faded asphalt of the long and treeless street. All this space and nowhere to go, no reason for going. It was as if his short life was winding down, nothing pulling him, nothing pushing, finally slowing to a stop.

And then there was a breeze, and it blew up gently from behind him, pressing his shirt to his back and inexplicably sending a shiver from his coccyx to the base of his skull, carrying with the sound of foot falls, soft and sneakered, stopping directly behind him.

“Shoes again. Weird”

And there was Carl.

Instinctively Daniel jumped forward, his pulse jumping with him as he spun to face his attacker. Here he was again, the strange voice behind him, now standing in front of him, stalking him on this empty street, ready for ...what?

Carl was tall, over six feet, and skinny, with arms disproportionately long so that his hands hung well below the pockets of his faded Levis. The headphone cord was stretched taut from his head to the walkman that dangled in his left hand, the designers failing to anticipate the simian limbs of this youth. Daniel could see himself in the reflection of the young man's overly large Varnet sunglasses, and he realized how ridiculous he looked with his fists raised in a fighting stance, confronting this comical figure.

"Violence is unnecessary I can assure you, unless you want to be utterly destroyed," said the figure.

Daniel lowered his fists and backed away. "What is it with you, dude? Are you like following me or something?"

Carl reached a skinny arm up to his headphones and pulled them down around his neck, a faint, tinny sound emanating from the foam padding. "You were saying?"

"I said, are you following me? Am I being trailed by the creeper of Chico High or what?"

"What."

"What?"

“Given to two options, I choose ‘what’ over the derogatory ‘creeper.’ That is the what.”

Daniel opened his mouth but no response came. He felt the throb of his quickened pulse begin to ebb; the hot breeze swallowed his momentary sweat. He glanced around the deserted street with its doors shut tight. All was strangely silent, all but the pixie band playing from Carl’s headphones. A nervous, uncomfortable smile split across his face.

“I guess we live in the same direction.”

“Quite perceptive. I live approximately half a mile due northeast, across from the Quik Stop. Shall we test my previous hypothesis regarding your footwear? There is a risk of our telepathic energies intertwining, but as we are traveling in the same direction there is little chance of calamity. I say we ride the wave.”

It took a moment for Daniel to realize that this was an invitation to walk together, and seeing no other option but to follow (or be followed) for several blocks, he accepted.

“So what are you listening to?” Daniel asked as they headed down the sidewalk.

“Discipline.”

“Discipline?”

Daniel’s newfound companion turned toward him slowly, and Daniel’s face reflected back at him in the lenses of his sunglasses. He felt as if he was being chastised by some sort of cybernetic life form.

“It is the name of an album by King Crimson. Heard of them?”

“I don’t think so. What songs do they sing?”

Carl’s head turned away slowly and Daniel could see the muscles in his jawline tighten.

“They don’t ‘sing’ anything you might hear on the radio. They are one of the foundations of progressive rock, headed by Robert Fripp, a great manipulator of sound. He takes the mathematic properties of music and expands them exponentially. Coupled with the melodic sounds of second guitarist Adrian Belew, they are totally freakin’ rad.”

“Sounds . . . strange,” said Daniel, feeling at odds with this conversation. “I’ve never been much into music. Never had the time.” He buried the thought of the pair of Bon Jovi CD’s on the cardboard nightstand by his bed.

“Dude, how is it possible for someone our age not to have time for music?”

“Well, maybe not time, more like the opportunity. My family moves around a lot, and my parents don’t really listen to much.”

“Dad in the military?”

“No, taxi driver.”

“Excellent.”

They crossed the street that Daniel usually took to reach his apartment complex, but he decided to let it pass.

“Would you like a taste of Crimson?” Carl asked, holding out the headphones. Daniel accepted and the walkman was passed to him.

A landscape of guitar notes climbed over his eardrums and met in the middle of his cranium. “*Taaalk, it’s only talk. Babble, burble, banter, bicker bicker bicker brouhaha. Baaalderdash, ballyhoo, it’s only talk – backtalk.*” Another guitar screeched like an elephant’s trumpet at a piercing volume, forcing Daniel to remove the earpieces.

“Well, you’re right, that’s not going to be on any radio stations I’d listen to.”

“Indeed not.”

They approached Verano Boulevard and turned right. This was a major thoroughfare and the noise of the traffic made Daniel nervous and conversation difficult. At the used car lot they crossed the avenue and turned left. In the distance Daniel could see the sign for the Quik Stop.

“So did your dad drive a taxi all the way here from . . .”

“Vegas, and no, we have our own car. The companies don’t let us keep them.”

Carl looped the headphones back around his neck. “That sucks. I wonder what the fare would be, tearing across the desert in a checkered yellow.”

“Checkered yellows are mostly just in New York.”

“Dude, tell me you’ve lived there.”

“Yeah, when I was ten, for about six months. In Brooklyn.”

“That is righteous.”

It strangely thrilled Daniel that someone would view this in a positive light. The experience itself had been far from righteous. He remembered the dilapidated brownstone with no furniture save a table and three chairs, the blocks in his neighborhood he quickly learned to avoid, and the hidden life of his father, who lived like a missing person, a phantom, while they were there. It couldn’t, and didn’t, last. He’d never been so happy to board a Greyhound bus.

“Libation time,” Carl remarked as he shifted course in a diagonal trajectory across the parking lot of the Quik Stop. Daniel followed, jogging to keep up.

They emerged ten minutes later with 32 ounce Ices in hand, Carl carrying a giant bag of Doritos. “Let’s open these at my humble abode, a mere block to the north.”

The side street quickly swallowed the sound of the busy avenue behind them. Daniel sucked the sticky cold through his straw, refreshed by both his beverage and companionship.

Carl turned up the walk of the corner house, a large, colonial style house with columns built into the façade. An expanse of overgrown lawn fronted the building, and the walkway was wide enough for four or more people to walk shoulder-to-shoulder up to the double front doors. The driveway, too, was double wide and led into the back yard. From what Daniel could glimpse, the backyard was covered in asphalt.

The front door opened with a vacuum-sucking sound and the two boys walked into the cold, carpeted entryway. The interior was dark, especially so coming in from the bright afternoon sun, and Daniel lost Carl for a moment as his friend slid past him and into the living room. He crept slowly forward with his hand on the wall to guide him as his eyes slowly adjusted to his surroundings. Two sofas ran parallel lengthwise across the room, separated by a long, faux wood coffee table. Dark, rust colored velvet upholstery covered each, outlined by curlicued wood, thoroughly scuffed and darkly stained. Two matching easy chairs stood at the end, separated by a table and lamp imprinted with a horse and carriage on its glass bottom. The opposite end of this arrangement opened on to a fireplace, its red bricks dusted with splotches of cement. There was no television, no stereo. The room was cold and smelled old and unused.

He heard Carl bumping around up the hallway and continued after him. There was another large entryway that opened into an identically sized room, another fireplace in the exact same position as the last. The same furniture was in this room too, but it was rearranged haphazardly to make room for a large oak desk. There were two large file

cabinets standing side-by side, and Daniel determined that they must either be completely empty or filled to capacity, for there were manila folders stacked and scattered everywhere about the room, covering the old sofas and easy chairs, creating a city skyline on the coffee table. They were stacked on the desk too, leaving only a small workspace in the very center, which was occupied by a white computer, the green DOS cursor pulsing in the screen upper left hand corner.

“My mom’s office,” said Carl, suddenly appearing at Daniel’s shoulder. “Actually her second. Her real one is at the university, but those faculty offices are miniscule. She brings the overflow home.”

“Your mom teaches at Chico State?”

“Yeah, ancient Greek and Roman literature. The classics are required by the end of everyone’s sophomore year, so she’s got a full load.”

Daniel exhaled through his nose as he took in the mountains of paperwork.

“Smart lady.”

“Indeed. PhD and Volvo too. She loves the raw subject matter. I’m not sure she’s too wild about her beer-besotted students’ interpretations of ancient texts though. She calls them the student body of Bacchus.”

Daniel took a sip of his Icee and wondered who Bacchus was. He put it together that his dad was probably familiar with the man.

“I should inform my father that we are here. Would you like to see the basement?”

Daniel nodded and followed him down the wide hallway, passing a series of closed doors until they reached the end, the doorway propped open with a cinder block, a florescent glow coming from below the stairway.

“COMING DOWN DAD,” Carl shouted through the megaphone of his hands. He led Daniel down the stairs into a large room that was, oddly enough for a basement, quite warm. The walls were lined with shelves of television monitors, each displaying a different image like a schizophrenic showroom at Circuit City. Four long tables formed a giant square with a narrow entrance at the corner closest to the stairs. The tables were topped with more TV’s, masses of coaxial cables, phone lines, sound boards and other pieces of equipment full of dials, toggles, meters, buttons, and a sundry of flashing lights. In the center of it all stood a balding man, his white skin glowing in the florescent light like a ghost in a machine.

“Dad!”

Mr. Mettinger gave a start and turned to face the boys. Unlike his son, he was short with a perfectly rounded belly the size of a medicine ball. His pale blue striped shirt was spotted with oily stains in the front, with one sleeve rolled up and the other hanging unbuttoned at his wrist. The top button of his slacks strained against his protruding belly. His bald crown was encircled with hair, lightly salted, and his untrimmed mustache bore the same familiar seasoning. Daniel could not help but notice a good sized piece of scrambled egg dangling from its left corner.

“Home I see, and with a visitor.”

“Yeah, this is Daniel. Daniel, my dad.”

“Pleased to meet you Daniel,” said Mr. Mettinger, leaning over the table that separated him from the boys and offering Daniel his hand. “A friend from school I hope.”

Daniel shook hands and gave Carl a questioning glance.

“Yes, dad, from school. I assure you I attended today’s classes with the utmost precision,” Carl replied.

“Just checking, ha. Always good to check in.”

He smiled at the boys, rocking on the balls of his feet with both hands in his back pockets, and waited for someone to say something.

“You have a nice home, Mr., uh ...” Daniel stuttered to a stop, temporarily forgetting Carl’s last name.

“Mettinger. But please, call me John. No need to be formal down here. They certainly aren’t,” he said, nodding his head back to indicate the shelves of televisions that continued to flash their various worlds behind him, heedless of his inattention. “Ha ha, nothing formal about TV these days. Nothing at all.”

“No, I guess not.” Daniel scanned the screens behind him and spotted a M*A*S*H rerun, the exact program he would be watching at this very moment if he had not accepted Carl’s invitation. It was comforting to know it was still there.

“We’ll be heading upstairs now. Do you mind if we raid the fridge?”

“No, no, help yourself, just don’t touch the pie. It’s my contribution to dinner. Pleased to meet you Dan.”

“What is all that?” Daniel asked in a low voice as they reached the top of the stairs.

“What, the TV’s? That’s his work, his little project he was contracted to do by Viacom. 27 separate contracts, actually. Ingenious, in a deceptive sort of way.”

“I don’t get it.”

“He’s supposed to monitor a local independent channel for content, one that’s not affiliated with the major networks. It’s his job to make sure they’re not showing anything too naughty or nefarious. It’s an occupation quite coveted by the couch potatoes of the world.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Only dad is too smart for that. My father is gifted in his own special way, in that he has multiple attention spans. He can concentrate on several things at once, without any dilution of brainpower, so watching a single station is tedious to say the least. Thus the many screens you saw below.”

They were walking back down the hallway. Carl stopped at a closed door and opened it, turning in the doorway to face Daniel.

“But Viacom only allows one channel per independent contractor. So my dad has had to borrow a few identities – 26 to be exact. All separate addresses and everything. And he’s devised a way to have them all wired into our basement,”

“So he just sits there and watches TV all day?”

“Yes, all 27 of them. It’s not so easy, I’ve tried. But he claims to have something else going on with it all though, something he’s never clearly explained to mom or me. Something to do with satellites. He’s always changing the wires in there, trying out new equipment he picks up from flea markets.” Carl smiled a giant Cheshire smile, his lips an Icee blue, “It’s rather nutty, but I like it. Shall we round out our meal?”

The kitchen was enormous, with more white and stainless steel than Daniel's eyes could absorb at once, and the three rows of fluorescent tube lighting didn't help matters any. White-faced cabinets lined three walls atop the glaring silver of the counters. Two sinks faced each other from opposite walls – large rectangular basins, one filled with dishes, the other with a variety of houseplants. The center island was comprised of two tall, large stainless steel tables pushed together and bolted to the floor. At the end of these was a stove and oven surrounded on either side by wood counters well worn from years of service as cutting boards. The far wall hosted the room's only window, a large opening with unfinished trim, its bare wood dusted by the chalk of exposed drywall edging. A refrigerator stood like a lonely soldier towards one end of a line of cabinets, strangely in front of them, its cord reaching up over the counter to plug into the outlet in the middle of the wall.

Carl walked over and opened the freezer. "Ice Cream? We've got spumoni, praline pecan, mint chip aaannnd ... espresso bean."

Daniel mumbled his preference for mint as Carl got the bowls from an overhead cabinet.

"This is one of the strangest kitchens I've ever seen," Daniel said. "I feel like I'm in a doctor's office or something."

Carl kept his eyes on the ice cream as he scooped it into the two bowls. "Close, but not quite." He tossed a spoon to Daniel, which clattered on the metal surface in front of him. They both sat on stools on either side of the island. "A doctor's work was usually done before anyone made it to this kitchen."

Daniel thought the mint of the ice cream suited the atmosphere of the room, and he swirled the cold, antiseptic flavor around his mouth. He thought of the twenty-seven screens flickering their disparate images below him, the two living rooms, identical yet so completely different.

“I’ve never been in a house like this. It’s nice and all – I’m not saying it isn’t – I just-”

“It used to be a funeral home.”

Daniel’s movements stopped, his spoon dug midway through his next bite of ice cream. He moved his eyes from his bowl to Carl’s face with its raised left eyebrow, his blue-lipped smile pulled back to expose the green film over his teeth.

“A funeral home, a mortuary, last stop before heading six feet under.”

“Bullshit.”

“I assure you, I am quite serious. Look outside,” Carl said, nodding toward the unfinished window, “the parking lot was in the backyard. See for yourself.”

Daniel walked over to the window. Faded blacktop stretched from the far wooden fence to a strip of overgrown lawn between it and the house. Cracked white lines marked off room for at least ten spaces, and a tall pole stood at the far end topped by two floodlights, their covers rusted. A bulb dangled loosely, its socket held by a single frayed wire. In a corner of what was obviously a parking lot there was a tangled pile of patio furniture and at least two different bicycles, as if there had been a wrestling match that had been called a draw, the opponents frozen in a permanent state of exhausted rest.

“Okay, so your backyard’s a parking lot,” Daniel conceded as he walked back to the silver island. The sole of his shoe caught on something as he crossed the floor. “That

doesn't mean this was a funeral home." He turned his head to see what had snagged his foot. "The city wouldn't allow it. There must be some sort of health regulation or something." His eyes focused on four small sockets in the floor. He turned and sat down.

"Dude, my father has connections; he's into inter-corporate telecommunications, more than I can tell you about. Those who know better don't ask questions."

Daniel rolled his eyes and gave a chuckle of disbelief.

"Plus, the university owns this place. They leased it to us when they recruited my mom for her fellowship. I don't think the city got involved. It's all too big for local politics."

"Riiight."

"Look, I don't care if you believe me or not, but look, see the holes in the ground?" Carl turned and pointed where Daniel had just stumbled, and then to three other spots in a rectangular formation. "There, there, there and there. Notice how these tables are bolted to the ground? Well this one used to be over there, with plenty of room for two people to maneuver in between."

"So?"

"So do you notice how long these tables are? Seven feet, long enough for just about anyone to lie on – or to be laid out on."

Daniel dropped his spoon. "You mean they used to put the bodies right here!?!"

"Yep. Embalming tables. Fluids in, fluids out."

"That's disgusting!"

"It took a long time to get rid of the smell of formaldehyde."

"I can't believe –"

“Are you okay? You don’t look so well. Do you want to lie down?” Carl indicated the table. “We can have you looking like yourself in no time.”

Daniel pushed himself abruptly away from the table, but the rear legs caught on the surface of the floor and he tumbled backward. He grabbed for the edge of the table but slapped the edge of his ice cream dish just before going down. He landed on his back, the dish shattering beside him, splattering mint chip everywhere.

Carl let out a howl of laughter and his face quickly turned bright red from the silent asphyxiation of uncontained mirth. On the floor, Daniel laughed too as the melted dessert soaked into his shirt.

Interlude

I have to admit, the whole thing makes me anxious. Being born, that is. Losing one's knowledge, one's perspective – it's all a little frightening. Floating here, I can see everything. I can hover far away and admire the interconnectivity of it all, or I can come in close and observe something from thousands of different angles simultaneously.

But out there, it's like everyone is blind, like everyone wears a thousand veils and can only dimly see reality through layers upon layers of illusion. The veils hide the observer as well, so that no one really sees anyone else, not really.

And somehow, people have managed to hide from themselves.

The more I look at it, the more the whole thing seems so confining. Did I say that time and space are blessings? They are beginning to look more and more like prison bars.

But enough of that. Let us return to the world of my father as an adult. A bird's-eye-view, and why not? I'll play with perspective while I still can.

Chapter 4

My mind's eye hovers above the scene: Heads bowed toward open bibles, the balding crowns of men float and bob like olives in a martini glass. Hatless women expose their graying roots to the sun as they go around and around, and the girdle of the sidewalk has squeezed their circle into an oval. From up here the oval looks a lot like a kidney bean, or – strangely enough – the outline of a fetus ...

Irene LaTouga looks down at her dusty-white Mary Janes, feeling the pressure of the ground on the heel, rounding up along the arch, splaying out to the five digits of her toes before being released, only to be repeated on the right foot. Left. Right. Repeat without end.

Somehow her feet know not to touch the precious middle, for in the center there is life, sacred life. To step in the middle, well, they say that's murder. *He* says that's murder, so it must be.

But David is not here. A contractor's work is never done, he tells her, and he deems these silent vigils ineffective. Cute, but not much good, really. It does help to get the message out though, and that is worth a *little* something, so he lets his wife have her four hours twice a week.

I'd come more though, she thinks, I'd come every day if I could. Some of these people do – the Morgans, George Bennet, the Losler twins in their matching outfits – all retired, all devout Catholics, all walking this circle of life.

No silly woman, an oval! A Kidney-bean-fetus ... a casserole!

And it's so peaceful here, just walking, eyes hovering over scripture, having the time and relative silence to meditate on whatever comes to mind.

“BlIIIIIIlaaaaaaaaarrrrrrmmmmmm!!!!!!”

Irene's eyes startle wide in time to see the blue Toyota pass, horn blaring, the driver's arm raised out the window, the middle finger extended like a rapier.

She glances about, but her companions appear unfazed, heads still bowed, lips moving to the rhythms of ancient text. The circle continues untouched, unabated.

All but one. He halts for a moment and a pained look crosses his face as he turns his head to follow the car. Louisa Losler, the sassiest of the two elderly twins, nudges him in the back with her red leather bible and he moves again, catching up with the pace of the circle.

He is one of the new ones from the Newly Reformed Grace Baptist Church, the latest to contribute to the movement. For a moment this morning she thought there might be trouble, five unknown cars parking along the street around the Planned Parenthood clinic – protestors from the other side, maybe students from the University out to give civic activism a try. But it had only been this new group led by their pastor, a Reverend Saltine or something; she hadn't quite caught it.

“Here to help the cause,” he had said, “to add our number to yours both in action and in prayer.” The reverend was somewhere in his fifties, balding with white remnants, but fit and youthful in his demeanor. His wide smile somehow exuded affability and confidence without being overbearing or insincere.

George, who became their de facto leader when Father Rivera wasn't present, explained. "Now this is a silent vigil, which means exactly that. We don't shout. We don't chant slogans. We don't harass people. We are here to pray for those babies, and the mothers too. And to let them know their options."

"Oh, we understand that," replied the pastor. "Father Rivera explained the whole thing to us at the Tuesday meeting. All we've brought are our good books and our walking shoes. You lead and we'll follow."

George showed the new group the wire stand full of pamphlets that displayed various titles: "Natural Family Planning," "The Pill and Breast Cancer," and "Abortion: Can You Handle the Truth?" Two of the new men helped to unload the huge whiteboard and watched as George updated the sign with a red marker:

38 Days –

Babies killed by choice: 119,700

Babies saved (that we know of): 499

"All those souls ..." the reverend's voice trailed off as he fixed his eyes on a spot on the ground no one else could see.

The new group easily fell into line, much like the members of her church had three weeks ago when Pastor John organized a few of the congregation to come and help the Catholics. "It's time show our support, no matter what our denominational differences may be," he had said. And Irene had been one of the first to sign up. She thought it would

please her husband, a man whose whole body stiffened at the mention of the subject, who had been asked to leave the obstetrician's office after the sonogram showed that Scott would not be "normal." But David only halfway approved. This was time away from home, away from the kids, with little in the way of a direct result. And he didn't like the thought of some atheist intellectual asshole snickering at his wife's simple-mindedness as he drove past in his goddamn Audi. After a little while, however, he relented, and Irene had come to look forward to the days when she could walk the circle with the others.

There had been a quick round of introductions when the new group arrived, the kind where no one really catches anybody else's name. But as Irene stared at the man who had stopped and gaped in disbelief at the lone finger cutting through the cool afternoon, Irene wished she had paid better attention. The way he had been so disturbed by the interruption – she still heard these acts of vulgarity, acknowledged them, but hardly gave them a thought even as they occurred. And the other members of the new group, she could tell that they did their best to be like the veterans. But this man, his reaction was so *honest*. And the way he went back to his bible, the furrowed brow, the troubled countenance he wore as he wrestled his concentration back to the words on the page. The man was truly reading his bible. She watched him closely, and she could see he was actually having difficulty walking and reading at the same time. Not because of some innate clumsiness, but because the intense concentration on his book was overriding his basic ambulatory functions. It was admirable in a way. Cute too.

He was handsome enough, maybe a little over six feet tall, with dark curly hair, a little on the longish side, and his hooked nose made him look a little Jewish. Or Italian.

She never could tell the difference. She wondered if he had a special affinity for brown or if it was just what he had happened to put on today: Dark tan corduroy pants, beige long-sleeved shirt under a dark-brown v-neck sweater and matching leather shoes.

Irene brought her attention back to her own bible, back to Ezekiel. “Woe unto the foolish prophets, that follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing! O Israel ...”

Oh Irene.

She let the book fall to her thighs, its dead weight shifting back and forth as she walked.

Where is your devotion? Here you are, walking around all day not even thinking about what you are reading or why you are here. You know why you are here – because here is not that house with its laundry and dirty dishes and sweeping and vacuuming; it’s not where Scott is, bless him, with his round face and stooped shoulders, watching television more than you should allow but not enough to make the day your own. It’s not where David is, or his stuff, or his damned authority that seems to seep from the very walls, that crouches in wait around every corner, past every doorway, that finally becomes a real, tactile thing that walks in every evening at five thirty expecting to be fed.

She glanced again at the man in brown holding his book close to his face, no doubt to absorb every word. Did the man have no cares? No worries? Did he drop from the sky, innocent and burden-less, able to give his every ounce of concentration to the present moment. Didn’t life pull him in all directions? Didn’t –

“Daniel.”

The reverend, who had been walking two people ahead of the man in brown, stopped and pulled Daniel out of the circle. He said something she couldn’t hear and both

men looked at their wristwatches. Daniel nodded and they shook hands. He stood and looked at the circling group for a moment before he noticed Irene watching him. She looked down quickly, bringing her book up far too close to her face, hiding it, wishing she could crawl inside it. Her hot breath reflected back onto her cheeks and made them moist.

The steady pace of the circle brought her around and she could sense that she was near him. Left. Right. Left. Right. Left –

Her eyes darted up involuntarily and, for a moment, stared into his.

Another moment and she was face-first into her bible, the soggy pages of Ezekiel saving her from embarrassment. She could feel the drops of perspiration form on her forehead and scalp. Time seemed to compress and before she knew it the circle brought her directly across from him. She peered over the edge of the book and saw his car pull away from the curb on the opposite side of the street.

She must have stopped, because the other twin, Bella, absorbed in her scripture (or maybe just dozing, as she often managed to do) walked right into the back of Irene, knocking her off balance, where she tripped and fell over her own feet, right into the center of the circle.

Chapter 5

“Sorry, he’s not here.”

Daniel stood in the foyer of the First Christian church community hall looking up at the rather large man on the ladder.

“Do you know when he’ll be back?”

The man was installing new molding around the doorway leading into the main hall, and his hammering was loud, methodical, and precise.

“Nope.”

A single blow sunk each nail almost flush with the trim, stopping just before the head of the hammer could dent the new wood. Daniel watched as six of these blows fastened the trim at the top. Without pausing to see if he had anything else to ask, the man took the small nail set tool out of his front shirt pocket and – six metallic pings later – finished the job. He turned on the ladder and looked down.

“I don’t think waitin’ for him will do you any good. He left with his hat and his case. He didn’t tell me a thing.”

“I have a note here to give him from Reverend Salter from the Baptist Church. Is there somewhere I could leave it?”

The man came down from the ladder. He was well over six feet tall and fit, and there was no the middle age paunch where his black and yellow plaid shirt tucked into a pair of Wrangler jeans. A construction worker’s tool belt sagged at his waist.

“Baptist Church, huh?”

“Yeah, the one down on Kilburn, next to the-”

“I know the one your talkin’ about. The Newly Reformed somethin’ or other. The one we’re doin’ joint maneuvers with.”

“Excuse me?”

“The little fairy-ring walk down at the clinic. Walkin’ with the Catholics of all things.”

Daniel gave a half-chuckle of disbelief and held out the envelope. “Can you please pass this along for me?”

The man’s hands remained on his hips. He nodded to the narrow hall on the right. “Freeman’s office is down that way. First door after the toilet. You can put it in the slot.” He turned his broad back to Daniel and walked to the several slats of door trim leaning against the wall. He grabbed one, lined it up perfectly perpendicular to the top piece of doorway trim, and continued to hammer with his former precision.

“What an asshole,” Daniel said aloud as he pulled his car onto 11th Avenue. The encounter was almost enough to kill the good feeling he had from the afternoon’s vigil. Almost, but not quite.

It had felt good to do something. There had been the two meetings, and it was exciting to plan, to talk about it with Reverend Salter and the others; he had been thinking about it all week. But actually being out there, actually taking a stand for something, to do something that mattered – it made him feel, well, alive.

Yes, there had been that one prick honking and flipping us the bird, but the quiet way in which the rest of them had born it was so dignified, so ...so Christian.

Yes, Christian.

After this afternoon the phrase felt like it fit again, something he could wear comfortably. It was a feeling he hadn't had in a while, a feeling he hoped he would feel again after Reverend Salter's sermon last Sunday. He wished Emily could have been there. Why she had backed out last night was something he didn't understand. Yes, she had to pick up Max and Rachel from school, but all that meant was that she would have to have left a little earlier than he would. They had already arranged the babysitter for Skyler, and he had taken the whole day off work for the event.

Then again, he thought, maybe it wasn't such a bad thing. It gave him a chance to really focus on his prayers, on what he was doing. He didn't have to worry about her and how she was taking all of it, if she was comfortable or not. He could be in the moment.

Well, for the most part at least. There was that woman, the graceful, silent one. He spotted her the minute they arrived but had both the good manners not to stare and the self-control to look away when he and Reverend Salter were introduced. Once he and the others joined the walk, however, it was easy enough to indulge in more than a few lingering glances. Her brown hair had been tied back so simply, revealing a slightly freckled face without make up. The collar of her long sleeved blouse was buttoned almost to the top, and her long, flowing skirt swayed slightly to the rhythm of her walk. He had to force his attention back to his prayers, and more than once he had stumbled. And later, while Reverend Salter was giving him the message he had just delivered, he thought he caught her staring at him.

A pair of brake lights flashed ahead and brought Daniel back to driving, back to the complicated present, back to Emily.

Back to the boredom that had returned so stealthily to their marriage. Back to the numbness that he felt most days with her, with his job, with just about everything – the numbness of which he dare not speak.

Since last week's sermon, however, he hadn't felt that. It felt good to be with her, with the children.

But he had left the house angry this morning. Emily and her ever-present exhaustion, holding Skyler close to her like a shield, had backed out. Too much to do, she said. She'd make it next week, really.

This was like it had been before. Before God and Pastor Rick and the Newly Reformed Grace Baptist Church.

Before the night Carl, like a jolt of electricity from his youth, had returned.

“Libation?”

Carl extended his long, simian arm and handed Daniel the pint glass.

“To the suspension of the persistence of memory,” he said, and clinked his glass roughly against Daniel's, sloshing a small amount of the amber ale onto the floor of Duffy's Tavern.

Despite his frustration, an irrepressible smile grew on Daniel's face. It was good to see Carl after all these years. Eleven, to be precise, since the summer after high school

graduation when Carl had read *The Dancing Wu-Li Masters* and took off in search of Gary Zukav. “Dude, the great divide has been crossed,” he had said, “What we have here is the unification of science and spirit. The seat of the soul has been discovered!” And Carl was off, a few books and a change of clothes stuffed into a ratty canvas backpack, bound for the Esalen Institute in Big Sur. He had invited Daniel to come with him, but his father’s health had begun to fail earlier in the spring, and he would be dead of lung cancer by February of the following year. Besides, Daniel couldn’t get past the first twenty pages of the used, dog-eared copy Carl insisted on buying him. All those different meanings of Wu-Li? Who cares? And the moment Zukav began to delve into quantum physics it was all over for Daniel.

He received a postcard that September he could only halfway decipher, covered in a series of scribbles that resembled Carl’s usual scrawl. Something about another book, *The Tao of Physics*, and the great shortcut of Fritjof Capra. That was the last he had heard of him for the next eleven years until this evening, when, in the middle one of those do-or-die arguments with Emily, the doorbell rang and he found Carl on his front porch, his left eyebrow raised Vulcan-like, as if Spock had arrived just in time to save Kirk from some uncontrollable human outburst of emotion. The interruption had forced Daniel and Emily to be civil, and after an uncomfortable introduction, Carl suggested they head out for refreshments. Emily, bless her, had the good sense to decline.

“It’s good to see you man, it really is.” Daniel took a drink and wiped the froth from his moustache.

“Likewise my long lost comrade, though I seem to have interrupted some sort of realignment of domestic bliss.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry you had to meet her like that. In that state, I mean.”

“It was a bad time, obviously.”

“Those are pretty much the only times late—”

“YAAAARRRRRRR!!!” the outburst came from four young men of fraternity age, one of whom was bent backwards over the bar having the ingredients of a margarita poured into his mouth.

“Ah, college life. I will have to visit my mother,” Carl said, turning back to his friend.

“How is she? And your dad? They didn’t move back here did they?” Carl’s mother had moved to San Francisco in 1997 after their home burned down, supposedly caused by an electrical short in the basement. The newspapers reported that John Mettinger was believed to have perished in the fire, but the body they found was so badly burned no positive identification could be made. He turned up, however, six months later at his wife’s apartment near the San Francisco State campus where she had transferred after the fire burned most of the research she had done while at Chico State. Apparently he refused to talk to reporters about where he had been, and investigators soon released the identity of the corpse found at their residence – Lee Bryant, a transient with a history of pyromania.

“No. They are still in the city. After the Clintons left office and Dad could relax, they found that they really enjoyed living there. I haven’t seen either of them since Veranasi.”

Daniel took another sip from his beer. “Dude, you haven’t changed. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Bill Clinton, the former president of the United States of—”

“Yes, I’ve heard of him. What does he have to do with your dad?”

Carl leaned in. “My dad figured it out way before anyone else. He joked about it over the phone to his friend. People were listening.”

“Okay, people, what people?”

“Let’s just say it got back to the president’s men. He was Humpty-Dumpty. They pushed.”

Daniel grinned. It was as if they had picked up the same conversation from eleven years ago – then or now, Carl’s mind was everywhere at once.

“But why?”

“Miss Lewinsky of course. Dad pieced it all together, down there watching all those stations at once, noticing the frequency of her appearance, the numerous casual hugs caught on tape. She showed up 4.7 times more in proportion to her fellow interns. Dad thought it quite amusing.”

“Riiiiight, so they tried to kill him. Who was his friend, that Tripp lady? No extra-marital affairs on your dad’s end I hope.”

“Scoff if you wish, but I have something to show ou that I think you’ll find interesting.” Carl reached in his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He opened it and pulled out a photograph, which he handed to Daniel. “Look at this.”

The photograph was of his father standing next to a shirtless, dark-skinned, long-bearded man, whose face was painted with numerous symbols Daniel had seen on postcards down at the import store. Strange looking Ali-Baba-ish temples loomed in the background.

“Okay, so he took a vacation. This proves nothing.”

“It proves that he found me, clever man. I hadn’t written since the Colorado retreat in ’94.”

“I have no idea what you’re—”

Daniel looked again. The dark-skinned man standing next to Mr. Mettinger had the appearance of a middle aged mystic – a lengthy, graying beard, long, matted hair, the top portion twisted into a peak at the crown, and though the skin was dark, it was also ashen, as if years of dead skin had decided to hang tight rather than slough off in the bath. But of course it was obvious that bathing wasn’t a ritual this individual engaged in regularly. His body was smudged all over with dust and caked mud, and the cloth that twisted about his waist and through his groin obviously hadn’t been laundered in years. His forehead was painted white with an orange stripe down the center, and, upon further inspection, his beard was not graying, but streaked with the same stuff that colored his forehead. A hand at the end of an elongated arm held a walking stick, a three-pronged trident head perched at its tip. Daniel closed one eye and squinted through the other.

The bearded freak was Carl.

“Un-fucking-believable. Dude, you are such a ... I mean, how did you ... why—”

“My sadhu years, and you may call me your holiness.” Carl gave a half grin and raised his Spock-eyebrow. “I had spent almost a year a living on the side of a mountain near the village of Pekhari before I made my pilgrimage to the Ganges. Imagine my surprise as I waded out of the sacred waters from morning prayers to find dear old dad waiting for me on the bank, Bermuda shorts and all.”

“Okay, how did you end up in – what country is this?” Daniel shook the photograph in his pinched fingers.

“That would be India. Have you left town at all since I’ve been gone?”

“Shut it. Okay, India. And you are a what?”

“I *was* a sadhu. It’s a kind of holy man. An ascetic.”

“Right. And you did this because?”

“It certainly wasn’t for the food and accommodations. My domicile was a lean-to next to small waterfall. It was beautiful, fucking incredible really. Mornings chanting around the dhuni, afternoons spent in meditation. The villagers brought food every day. Quite delectable too, at least at first. Once winter set in and my skin began to return to its indigenous pallor I don’t think they approved of me too much, the racist little shits. I think I was eating dog scraps towards the end of my stay.”

“Sounds fantastic.”

“Indeed, in particular the obligatory morning bath under the waterfall. After they became suspicious of my origins, boys from the village would sneak up every morning at dawn to make sure I performed the required immersion. Crystal-clear Himalayan snowmelt. I froze my balls off.”

This is just like the Carl I knew in high school, Daniel thought, except instead of the daily theoretical ramblings on the nature of existence, he was now talking about his own life, which, equally, made no sense at all.

“Okay, but are you going to tell me why were you there in the first place?”

“Too many shortcuts. Capra’s theories were sound, but his methods of reaching the upper levels of consciousness were beginning to strain. I thought I might take a more traditional approach. No doubt that is something you can appreciate.”

“Excuse me?”

“Too much acid. There I was, lost in the Rockies of Colorado, swirling with the quarks through time and space, while back on the physical plane my twirling body fell off a ledge I was too spun out to see. Fortunately the fall was not too great, though I couldn’t help but see the irony that, in my giant strides through the realms of metaphysics, simple Newtonian physics had pulled me back to earth. While my leg bones stitched themselves back together I began to delve into ancient Shaivistic texts, noting the plethora of connections with the new physics that I had been short circuiting my brain to see. Soon I was on a plane to Mumbai determined to achieve vairagya and find a sadhu guru.”

“I knew someday I’d hear you say ‘guru’ with a straight face. I still have no idea what you’re talking about, but I do know that my beer is empty, as is yours. Let me get the next round.”

They talked through the evening, Carl about his wanderings and philosophical quests, tales Daniel could only partially grasp, and Daniel about his life since high school. It was no contest for Daniel as to whose was the more interesting; Daniel had pretty much stayed put for the past eleven years. His mother, always the dedicated wife, died six months after his father, also from lung cancer, despite never having smoked in

her life. During her illness he started stocking shelves at Long's Drugs, and after she died he began a long and pointless career as a part time student at Butte Community College. He met Emily when he crashed a Chico State fraternity party, and they married eleven months later, right after he picked up a job reading meters for PG&E. Then came Max, then Rachel two years later. Ah Rachel. Rachel and the colic. Rachel and the crying. Rachel and the screaming. She finally outgrew the colic. He and his wife, however, picked up the screaming where she left off.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!” Daniel slammed his pint on the table, sloshing a portion of its contents over his hand and onto the floor. Well into his fifth serving, he had already made quite a puddle.

“If you’re really that curious, I have a small sampling here.” Carl said, again reaching for his wallet.

“That’s quite a treasure chest you carry around my friend. Did you make it all the way across Asia with just the wallet?”

“Actually I didn’t have the need for this for the majority of my sojourn. It wasn’t until I returned to the U.S. that I purchased another.” His fingers slid into an inner sleeve of the wallet and pulled out a small piece of paper. The paper was divided into little squares about a quarter of an inch wide. Printed in the center of each square was black and white yin and yang symbol, the two sperm-like halves chasing each other in an

infinite circle. The entire paper was the size of a business card, but several of the little squares were missing, pulled off at their perforated edges.

“Lysergic acid diethylamide, one of several vehicles for interstellar travel. Notice the appropriate symbol.”

“Okay, so this Frito-Lay guy—”

“Fritjof. Fritjof Capra.”

“Freetafuckingjerkoff! Whatever! So he says that what’s blotted on these little squares is going to blow our minds wide open so that we can see the sub particles that weave together the carpet of the universe, and they’re gonna look like the Buddha’s little fish circle here.” Daniel squinted and pointed his finger at the paper.

“Dude, your brain just performed some interesting acrobatics with what I just told you, but essentially, yes.”

“Let’s do it. I’m game.”

Carl smiled that rare Cheshire grin he reserved for special occasions – weddings, births, circumcisions, and acid trips. He ripped off two squares, split them apart, and raised his right index finger. The square stuck to the tip, the yin and yang swimming before Daniel’s eyes.

“Open your mouth and stick out our tongue.”

Daniel did as he was told. As if he were King Arthur knighting one of his heroes of the Round Table, Carl reached over and carefully placed the small piece of paper on Daniel’s tongue. He did the same for himself. Daniel looked as if he was about to speak but Carl stopped him with a gesture of his hand.

Carl raised his glass. “To the infinite beauty, to the infinite truth that this night will bring.” They clinked their glasses and finished off the remaining contents.

“Another round?”

The Spock eyebrow raised in assent.

A low humming traveled through his rectum, coming from somewhere deep in the planet’s core. Someone was trying to send him a message, but at these speeds it couldn’t possibly get through, not the way Carl was driving, not the way the atoms were closing in. Soon it would be impossible to move; they’d have to breathe the stuff, and it would clog the lungs, gum up the works ... he could feel a dense lump of it begin to swell in his throat: The lump of doom.

A violent jerk to the right, a correction, and the lump disappeared. The engine roared and the knife sliced through the thick mass of night.

Stay with the light, Carl, it’s the only way.

The light, the truth, the line that leads to truth. That, THAT was where they were going! Carl knew where the crystals were, he would find them as he had found them before. But there his father was hitchhiking on the side of the road, a deck of playing cards in one hand, that huge thumb sticking out, reaching -- good god, he’s going to crush the car! Swirls of thumbprint everywhere, getting into his shoes, staining the upholstery, splitting the music apart note by note into tiny pieces of sound—

“I’m not who my mother said I was!” The thought seared a jagged line across the topography of Daniel’s brain, filling his nostrils with burning sulfur. A chunk of grey matter crumbled off, gathered mass, and rolled topsy-turvy to the base of his skull in an

avalanche of sizzling neurons. He knew his mother was buried somewhere under there, and in an instant he saw the claw of her hand desperately reaching out to him.

“No more of that.”

“Keep your lips on the wheel, damn you!” The hunched figure next to Daniel obeyed.

How long they would last, Daniel couldn't tell. How could he know? With the wings of buzzards flapping in his ears it was impossible for a man to think. Space, space for thinking was what he needed. A cool place, spread out on the grass, far away from the all the blood that kept lapping up against the sides of the car.

High in the pines, the owl kept his eyes on the vehicle below as it crept slowly and erratically up the mountain road. From a steady crawl it would come almost to a complete stop, then lunge ahead for a few yards, slow down, then back up to a steady crawl, then a burst of speed and—

Screech!

Full stop, lunge forward, and then slow a steady ten miles per hour. A muffled throb of synthesizers emanated from the cabin of the vehicle, and through the steamed glass the owl could see the jerky, irregular movements of the two passengers inside.

In the field across from this spectacle the owl sensed movement. His pupils dialed in to the field mouse emerging from the dense thicket and, in one graceful motion, the owl swooped down to feed.

“Holy shit, what was that!?!” screamed Daniel.

“A garuda, no doubt protecting the sacred relics. We must be getting close.”

Suddenly Daniel was thrown back, the g-forces pinning him to his seat. He looked over to find Carl but he was far away, the cabin extended a hundred feet ahead and growing longer by the second. He could feel the skin on his face pull back, then tear down the middle and slide to the back of the headrest.

“YEEEEAAAHHHHAAAAHHHHH!!!!!”

His head jerked forward and smacked against the dash. Several explosions went off in his frontal lobe and blinded his vision.

“These fucking things are everywhere!” Carl exclaimed and Daniel was again thrown back against his seat. His two hands pressed against his cheeks in an attempt to hold his skin to his face. He could feel it squirming underneath his fingers.

They drove on a ribbon that was a road that kept stretching out and curling in on itself. Somehow Carl managed to navigate the decorative strip, but the curves kept coming faster and Daniel felt the tires losing their grip on the thin lines of polyester. A sharp left rolled the right side of his face against the window and pinned his pulsating eye against the cool glass. Outside a passing meadow turned to steel, and thousands of icy grey spikes reached for the moon in perfect geometric patterns.

“So beautiful.”

“Isn’t it? I don’t know how we reached the snow so soon, but I’ve got it under control.” Carl made another sharp turn and Daniel could feel the two wheels on the driver’s side skim the edge of the shoulder.

“No snow.”

“But it IS. Jagged little pieces that grow together. Crystals weaving the fabric of reality from that which cannot be held but is omnipresent, truth created from nothing, yet something that is always there!”

He was right, of course. And the trees outside were frozen solid – he saw it now – covered in the sprinklings of truth, a truth that would vanish in the morning thaw.

“Always moving, forever solid,” said Daniel.

“Yes! You’ve got it! Temporal, yet eternal! Captured inside the crystal, and we are on our way to find the keeper, to the center of light refracted!”

Trees made of ice on both sides of the road stretched upwards and over, their interlacing branches forming fractal webs of glowing wire that grew and surrounded them in a vortex of crystal. The wormhole turned and pulsed around the car as it sailed through the blue-white cavern, the entire universe swirling around them in a fantastic kaleidoscope made from the light of countless galaxies. The car cleared the edge of the phenomena and shot out into a wide-open plain.

The moonlight and open space burst upon their dilated pupils in a flash of divine glory. It was all brightness and splendor, and they floated together for several seconds in the same hallucinogenic cloud.

“Almost there.” Carl’s voice hung in the air, but Daniel was falling. He looked up to see the bottom of Carl’s words as he came crashing through the atmosphere.

The metallic meadows were back, needles and all, along with the low hum of machinery.

“Carl, no!”

“Yes! Just another second!”

Daniel saw the huge metal spike burst through the asphalt straight ahead. He screamed and tried to grab the wheel but Carl’s long arm pushed him back. The spike was twenty feet high, curved and thick at the base like the horn of some gigantic beast, and it drew them in like a lodestone rock. Daniel opened his door, looked at his bug-eyed friend hunched over the wheel, and leapt out of the speeding car.

He hit the ground, the brute force of the blow knocking whatever he thought he was out of his body. He saw it – him – rolling over and over, and the speeding Mazda with no lights and an open passenger door shot ahead into the distance. It missed the curve, jumped the embankment, and fell out of his line of sight, just as he was sucked back into the cavity of his own body.

He was stone, a fragment of geology scattered haphazardly on the earth. A blue hand that had once been his lay solid and immobile in his line of sight. He could feel the cells of his body constricting, growing more and more dense, solidifying into a single mass. Something needed to be done, something innate, involuntary—

“Huhhnnnn!”

The breath came suddenly, and the rush of air into his lungs dissolved the rapidly spreading inertia. But with the breath came pain; a knife stabbing him in the side, going

ever deeper the more his lungs expanded. Short gasps, half breaths, were all he could take, until his heartbeat gradually slowed and the blood began to flow into his brain.

Slowly, carefully, he raised himself to his knees, ever mindful of the knife he was sure to find lodged in his ribcage. He felt with his hand but there was nothing there. Another breath, however, and it was back, the tip of the blade slowly slicing through the wall of his left lung. Half breath, half breath.

He turned little by little and looked at the road behind him. The giant spike was gone. To the left the road emerged from a grove of pine trees onto the plateau where he knelt. It continued past him, past where the giant spike had been, and abruptly turned to the left about a hundred yards in the distance.

The night was still and blue and silent. He gripped his side and forced himself to stand. For a moment the field looked like a field should, and then the grass began to glow and blur upward toward the half-circled moon which sucked the light like a vampire. He closed his eyes and tried to force the hallucination away, but the image had burned itself onto the canvas of his eyelids.

Fucking acid, he thought. It wasn't letting go. He had to find the car, find Carl, or hope that Carl found him. He began to walk in the direction they had been headed.

Carl wouldn't just leave him here, would he? Sooner or later he would realize that he'd lost his passenger. He'd turn around and pick him up. Maybe they could find a hotel room and ride this out until the morning. Carl had experience with this type of thing; he'd take care of him.

Daniel stopped when he reached the curve. Something wasn't right. There was a slight embankment but no guardrail, and in two places the earth had been compressed below the ridgeline. He swallowed what felt like a small bird and peered over.

The curve was on the top of a hill, which sloped downward at an angle that became less severe as it lost altitude. Daniel had to close his eyes and force away the impression that the whole thing was made of bone, that he was a minuscule creature treading on the skeletal remains of some extinct leviathan. He let the vision dissolve before he opened them again.

That's when he saw the overturned car basking in the glow of the vampire moon.

Daniel rushed down the embankment to the bottom of the sloping hill. The car was upside down, leaning to the left on the crushed roof of the driver's compartment, and he had to go around to the passenger side to look in.

The door was unlatched, and Daniel knelt down and peered in, ignoring the sharp pains in his side. It was difficult to see anything in the dark compartment, and most of the driver's side was compressed into itself. He had to look for a long time before he saw anything that resembled Carl.

He walked for many nights, yet the sun never came, and the winged harpies that flew just behind the trees had only just given up their pursuit. He had lost blood, liters of it. Or maybe just a little. Possibly none at all. Time after time he felt it pouring out of his nose, out of his eyes, but when he tried to wipe it away there was nothing – his hands were clean. Other times they were covered in blood, inky black, which disappeared when he wiped them on his jeans. Blood that left no stain. And the rushing wings of the harpies

had taunted him the whole of his long, long walk, but they refused to show themselves, flapping back to the cover of the forest when he tried to catch them, shadows of wings that hid in the branches.

Once he stopped and vomited a fountain of blue feathers.

Only now he couldn't be sure if this night was indeed the eternal darkness it seemed to be, or if he had only been walking for a few hours. The harpies were gone. The bleeding-that-wasn't came less frequently. The bones in his knees rubbed and chafed against each other for want of fluid. The knife in his ribcage was still there, but the blade had dulled and he only felt it when his foot hit the pavement.

When the first car passed him on the road he had hid in a ditch, terrified of what might come of things, of being brought back to the mangle of steel and flesh behind him. The second and only other vehicle that passed him was an ancient Chevy truck that crawled slowly up the hill he was descending. He stood there on the side of the road as it crept past him, but the old man driver didn't even glance in his direction. That must have been hours ago.

Up ahead he saw a soft glow through the trees, and soon he knew he was approaching some outpost of civilization. Daniel quickened his pace.

The word BAR came into focus, flashing neon of white, then red, then both together. A door on the front of the building opened, bringing a muffled burst of country music to his ears. A figure emerged, walked to the outline of a pickup, and drove away. Somewhere in his mind the lyrics to "Beer for My Horses" slid to the fore, did a heel-to-toe shuffle, and fizzled out in a short of electricity.

There were five cars in the small lot in front of the bar. Daniel opened the door and walked in. The smell of nicotine and stale beer were welcome sensations, and the orange glow of the interior wrapped him in a warm blanket of familiarity. Two couples sat at different tables with the jukebox between them. The counter of the bar stretched across one wall and several patrons sat hunched on stools, occasionally glancing at the muted television mounted in the corner. On the screen a reporter from CNN interviewed a group of soldiers as they stood in a dusty street of Baghdad.

Daniel walked over and sat several stools away from the closest person, near the adjacent wall. He stared up at the television and ordered a beer, avoiding eye contact with the bartender altogether. The soldiers entered the home of an Iraqi family, who huddled wide-eyed in their small kitchen watching the soldiers conduct their seemingly random search of the house.

He turned away from the television and gazed at the wall to his right. The head of what was once a healthy buck looked down at him from his mount on the wall. Long ago a spider had attempted to build a web in the rack of antlers, but the few strands that remained caught nothing but dust and second hand smoke. The glass-green eyes stared imploringly at Daniel and he could not turn away. Slowly the left eyebrow raised and a voice that was Carl's boomed and echoed over the twang of the jukebox:

“TRUTH!!!!!!”

Daniel jerked backwards and nearly fell off his stool, sending another jolt of pain through his torso. He turned to judge the reactions of the others, but they were as they had been. There was a beer in front of him now and he reached for it with a sweating, shaking hand.

“Son, is everything alright?”

A tall, balding, slightly overweight man leaned against the bar to his right. He wore an oxford shirt over a black turtleneck, beige chino pants, and a pair of black Converse high tops. He set his coke on the counter.

“I’m fine,” said Daniel, looking away with a wince.

“Well, you’ll have to excuse me for saying so, but you don’t look fine.” The stranger looked Daniel over. “You look like you’ve been in an accident”

Daniel grasped the beer bottle with both hands in an attempt to stop their shaking. “I’m fine, really. I just fell down the ... I think ... I think I might have broken a rib.” He turned to face the stranger. Above the man loomed the buck, which had lowered its head as if to charge.

The man whistled. “You think maybe you should have that looked at? Maybe we should get you out of here and into a hospital.” Behind him the antlers pointed down menacingly, and the buck gave a loud snort.

“NO!” Daniel shouted, and the buck reverted to its original pose. Several people turned in his direction, but the stranger signaled with his hand that he had everything under control. Daniel’s breath was hard and quick and his eyes were fastened to the work of taxidermy on the wall.

“It’s okay, it’s okay. Maybe we could just sit over at one of the tables for a spell and you can finish your beer. Relax a little bit. Talk.”

“Yeah, that might be a good idea,” Daniel replied, keeping his eyes on the dead deer as the man steered him to a table in the far corner of the room. They sat down and,

as the man reached across the table to shake Daniel's hand, a wooden cross on the end of a necklace slid out from under the folds of the man's oxford shirt.

"I'm Pastor Rick Martin of the Newly Reformed Grace Baptist Church, and I'm here to help."

Thank God for Pastor Rick, thought Daniel as he turned onto Grayson Avenue. He was one of the kindest men he had ever met. So forgiving, not only for helping Daniel that night and into the next few months, giving him counsel, helping him deal with the police, the coroner, the lawyers ... but for the help beyond. He opened a door Daniel had shut long ago, to God, to church, to community – and to Emily. Pastor Rick was the channel through which God had saved their marriage. With God Daniel had purpose, and with that purpose he could work and love again with conviction. Within a year after Carl's death they had renewed their wedding vows and Emily became pregnant with Skyler. Daniel was a better, attentive, more present father and husband. He could stand the long days at work and looked forward to coming home.

But Pastor Rick had gone, moved to Boise almost two years ago to be closer to his parents before they died, and, strangely, they hadn't heard from him since. It took a good six months before the church council had found Reverend Salter. He was a good enough man and devoted to the church, but things were different.

It seemed, however, that Reverend Salter had found a purpose, a noble calling for his flock, and through him God had called on Daniel as well. They were going to save the precious gift of life, he and Emily and – hey, why not – the kids, somehow. Things were looking up again. The feeling had returned.

“And just in time,” Daniel said aloud as he pulled the car into the driveway. He would go inside and kiss his wife and hug his children and be grateful for this life that they all shared together. By God he would. Really.

He would.

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