

King Marcine



Brennan Chadwick Emerson

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This book was written between 2002 and 2005.

The Author was between twenty-two and twenty-five years old.

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Other books by Brennan Chadwick Emerson:

Epitaphs of a Broken Society

Autobiography of a Dream

A Brief Existence

Windfall

Contents

Book One; King Marcine		
Part One; the Gentleman	.	3
Part Two; the Traveler	.	33
Part Three; the Interloper	.	47
Book Two; Menagerie		
A Sacrifice	.	84
Journey of a Requisite Man	.	85
The Sideways Lightning Bolt	.	86
Apple Leaves	.	87
Midnight Stroll	.	88
Puppy Love	.	90
On a Bridge	.	91
An Evening	.	92
Feathers	.	93
Faithless	.	94
Now She Knows	.	95
March 3 rd	.	96
An Hour before Dusk	.	97
Relaxation	.	98
The Heart of Innocence	.	99
Whispers from the Mind of God	.	101
A Mirage and a Metaphor	.	104
Book Three; A Philosophical Turn		
That Strange Disposition Sometimes Called a Soul	.	110
On the Occasion of My Birth	.	112
The Nature of Myself	.	113
Prison	.	114
Conversation between an Agnostic and a Mystic	.	115
Of Ancestry	.	135
Musings	.	136
Rise Up Ye Accursed Dreams	.	138
Thank You	.	140
With God in My Heart	.	141

Differences	147
A Second Conversation	148
Perhaps	154
Confrontation of Self	155
Book Four; Analogous Pasts, Presents and Futures	
A Caveman in Eden	159
The Death of a Man of Peace	176
The Last Words of a Heretic	181
Found in the Black Forest	183
Notes by a Bitter Man	188
Notes by a Tormented Man	190
Notes by a Happy Man	192
On the American Occupation of Iraq	195
Soldier; an Epitaph	196
A Stuffed Lion	197
Charisse	199
The Final Option of Peace	210
The Unquenchable Art	213
Josie's Forgotten Friend	215
Atlantis (Inspired by a Dream) or A Future that Shall Never Be	219
Unfinished Memoirs of Emperor Enic-ram	242
Antarctic Dream	244

Dedication: An Apology

To all those I have wronged in life, whether in thought or action, whether with purpose or by coincidence, whether or not I have been aware of the injury thus caused.

As well to those whom I have yet to wrong but assuredly shall for as I am human, I shall error and in my error bring harm to others despite my utmost effort to live without disrupting the enjoyment of this life by others.

If in some way I have made you feel down, I apologize. Likewise if in my actions I have harmed your way of life or made you question beliefs which brought you joy. For every sin and every imbecility. It seems suffice to state that for every action I have ever taken, every word I have said and every thought to pass my mind that has in some way caused an ill effect; I am sorry. For the remaining actions, rare though they may have been, I hope, in some way, they have brought to someone, if not but myself, a little peace and joy.

*I am not wise.
I am not profound
or adapted well
to the world around.*

*I am but a child
who wants to run in the breeze,
laugh at the birds
or dance in the rain.*

BOOK ONE
King Marcine

A man must have ideals,
otherwise he is a slave to the world as it is.
To adapt is not enough; he must strive for change.

Part One; the Gentleman

Chapter One

It was three a.m. when the young man left his apartment and walked leisurely down the street. A homeless man stood at the corner, waving his arms about and shaking his head as if in the attempt to conduct an orchestra. He screamed unintelligible curses at the imaginary musicians. He smelled of urine and stood beside a grocery cart of assorted garbage, each article, no doubt, with some meaning to his demented mind. The young man walked past trying not to laugh, or cry.

Two months earlier, on a similar walk, he had found the man in the same peculiar pose. He had approached and offered to bring him some food. The homeless man had continued to yell and then turned to look the young man directly in the eyes. The look was vacant, as if this man's reason had deserted him and left him entirely without connection to humanity. For a moment they stood looking at each other before the homeless man returned to his irreverent cursing. The young man had taken five dollars from his pocket and held it out. A second time their eyes met, but gone was the vacant look and in its place was rage. Before the young man could step back, the homeless man pounced at him, but he missed and the young man had backed cautiously away. The lunatic did not follow.

This time the young man did not approach the homeless man, glancing only once behind before he rounded the block. He took a deep breath and watched the cloud arise and dissipate as he slowly exhaled. He considered the homeless man for a moment but did not know what to make of him. No matter how he tried, he could not conceptualize what it must be like to live in such a mind. More he wondered what such an individual felt and how, if at all, he interacted in the real world. This man, as with so much else when he took time to truly consider, did not make sense.

He found himself overlooking the sea; its waves glittering in the moonlight. His gaze turned upward; the white moon. It was almost full. The last time he had looked, it had been a sliver. He tried to remember how many days it had been but failed. He did not even know what day it was. He rarely did anymore, but what reason did he have to keep track of such a thing? He smiled at the thought. It had been that way for at least six months, since he quit his last job and moved into the plain apartment he now resided in. It had been hard working the past few years, but now that he was free, hopefully forever, from the need to work, he realized it could have been much worse. He was only twenty-seven after all. Yes, if he had realized earlier what was important to him, he might have found freedom at twenty-two, but in those five years, he had learned greatly about both life and himself. Yes, he had much yet to learn, but now he was free to pursue that knowledge as he desired.

A sharp wind broke his thoughts, and he turned toward his apartment. He was beginning to feel drowsy. A car drove by. The driver seemed to look at him with disdain. The young man smiled. He smiled often; at himself, at others, at life. Simply, he enjoyed living.

A distant church bell struck four. He did not even count the tones. He was remembering a time he walked in streets half a world away, listening to a thousand conversations he could not understand. Those streets, however, were likewise silent in the darkest night, perhaps more so. He looked at the life around him. A few lights were on. A restaurant; a few people inside. A laundromat; empty. A gym; two, three, people ran on treadmills, while one more stood with a weight belt, drinking a bottle of water. The office buildings were bare, except for in one window a few silhouettes moved slowly, as if they had been working the entire night. Another car drove through the emptiness. A morning fog was beginning to set in. Somewhere, far off, a siren briefly sounded. All these were normal. Then a strange murmur, as of delirium. The young man looked about a moment before the sound repeated.

It came from the back doorway of a small bank. He moved closer. The ragged figure of a person, half covered by a filthy blanket, writhed in the seeming agony of a nightmare. The groans were of anguish. The body shuddered, turned. The blanket slid off. He could see skin through the tears in the person's jeans. A worn backpack and a grocery bag sat behind the person, in the corner. Unknowingly, the young man had knelt beside the shivering body. Then a scream, and the body uprose. Again he found himself staring into eyes he could not understand, but these were not of insanity or rage but rather terror and sadness.

Neither person moved or attempted to speak, while their eyes remained locked. Gradually the terror subsided in the opposite stare, though the sadness remained, and the young man came to comprehend the face surrounding the wounded eyes. It was dirty and cracked, yes, but it was yet young and, perhaps, beautiful. He was not sure at first, a hat and collar covered nearly half the face, but it was indeed a female face. He smiled. She smiled cautiously in return. Suddenly he realized the varying thoughts likely running through her head, and he sat back a bit in hopes of reassuring her.

"I apologize," he said finally, "but you seemed like you were in trouble."

She seemed to relax a little when he spoke, but she did not speak and remained in the position she had held since awakening. They continued to stare at each other in silence. Twice the young man opened his mouth to speak, but the words, rejected by his mind, never reached his tongue. At last he began to laugh. The girl's expression changed, but to what he was unsure. He stopped laughing but continued to smile.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I couldn't help imagining the two of us sitting here, staring at each other."

Finally the eyes softened, and the lips parted in a smile. Yes, it was a beautiful face, the young man concluded. The girl shook her head and relaxed her position, but she still did not speak.

“Are you okay?” The young man asked, the smile falling from his lips.

“Yes.” Her voice cracked as if it had been a long time since she had used it. “Yes,” she repeated, “I had a nightmare.”

“I mean, besides that.”

She did not answer, but the sadness, which had briefly lightened, reabsorbed her countenance.

“When was the last time you ate?”

“Yesterday.” As she spoke her lips quivered, and her eyes began to water. Before he could ask how much she had eaten, she turned from him and buried her face in her sleeve. She sobbed for a few minutes before turning back. His eyes were watering, but he did not cry.

“Will you let me help you?”

She looked at him a moment, wiped her face again with her coat sleeve and then nodded, but not with confidence, more as if to say, “I do not want to, but I am too weak to refuse.” Sensing this, he felt the need to reassure her.

“I know you have no reason to trust me, but please believe that I seek only to help. I have an apartment not far from here. It is not much, but I have food. There is a shower, and you can have my bed. I can sleep on the floor.”

“Okay,” was all she managed. He smiled again and stood. He picked up her blanket, folded it and handed it to her. She put it in her backpack and also stood. He reached for her grocery bag, but she halted his arm with her hand. She shook her head to indicate that she did not need it and then motioned with her hand for him to lead the way.

They walked slowly, silently, towards his apartment. The first of the morning traffic had begun as the city slowly returned to life. They passed the fast food restaurant. The homeless man continued to preach. The young man smiled at him and wondered again what thoughts crowned his head. Then he wondered about the girl walking hesitantly at his side. It seemed one moment she was about to lean on him, the next as if she would run away.

Chapter Two

The girl stumbled on the stairs leading to the young man’s apartment. He lived on the third floor of an old seven-story office building, which had long ago been converted to small, cheap, rooms. There were still businesses on the first two floors. The young man took the girl’s backpack, which had fallen off, and

steadied her while they climbed the last flight to his floor. She seemed weak and leaned against the wall while he opened the door to his apartment. He held the door while she entered and then closed it behind them. He held out the backpack to her, and she drew close to take it. She looked at the floor and then dropped the backpack and wrapped her arms around his neck, attempting to kiss his lips. He turned his head and leaned back, looking into her eyes. She still looked down. He gently removed her arms and backed away. She sat on the floor and began to cry, her arms crossed about her knees and her face buried in her lap. The young man sat beside her, a few feet away, but did not look at her.

They sat as such for a few minutes before the girl raised her head and looked at him. He turned towards her. She smiled, this time with hope. She was wearied, but the fear, which the young man had sensed since their first meeting, was gone. It made him feel good, to see her smile like that.

“Do you want something to eat?” He asked.

“Yes, please.” The smile waned. “I thought that was why you brought me here, and I was ready to do, well, honestly, anything. I never have before, though. I didn’t want to, but...” She seemed ready to cry again. The young man’s heart was melting; the desire to hold her and let her cry away the world overwhelmed him.

He placed a soft hand on her shoulder. “I do not know what has happened to you, nor do I care right now. You need to rest and to eat; here you can do that without apprehension.” He stood up and walked around the small counter the girl leaned against into the kitchen. He put a pot of water on to boil, as well as a kettle. “There is fruit in the bowl on the table.” The girl did not respond. He walked around the counter. She was asleep. Smiling, almost in a paternal way, he walked the handful of paces to his bed and pulled the covers back. He then returned to the girl and lifted her in his arms. She was light, too light. At the bed he set her down and softly removed her shoes. Her socks were stained with filth and torn in several places. He removed them also and covered her legs with the blankets. Carefully he removed the tattered jacket, and lastly he removed her cap, revealing matted waves of dark blonde hair. He pulled the blankets up to her neck and kissed her on the forehead before turning from the bed. He turned back and gazed upon her sleeping. Her face was gaunt, but as it lay sleeping, it was at peace. He yawned. The kettle whistled, and he walked to the kitchen and turned both burners off. From the closet he removed the only two spare blankets he had and laid them on the floor. He looked at her once more, turned out the lights and lay on the floor, beneath both blankets. He did not even undress or consider that he did not have a pillow. In fact, he lay on his back, a position in which he had never been able to fall asleep.

And for a long time he did not sleep. Her face played in his thoughts, and he dreamed a great many things about who she was and who she might become. But he did not know, he censured himself, any more than the few hours they had passed through life together. He thought of her smile and found himself

smiling as he remembered the relief in her eyes after he had not taken advantage of her. What circumstances could lead someone to such a place? He could not help but wonder. Then he remembered the terror he had first witnessed in her eyes. What had she been so afraid of in her dreams?

Chapter Three

She was still asleep when the young man awoke in the early afternoon. It seemed she had not moved. He folded his blankets, put them away and then set the pot of water on the stove to boil. He took an orange from the bowl, and while he peeled it, he opened a curtain and looked out the lone window of the room. The world was moving as usual, cars speeding by and pedestrians hurrying along to conduct their business. When the water was boiled, he sliced four potatoes and put them in to cook. While they softened, he took a shower. He then sat down at the small table with a book and ate. He looked at her a few times, but she did not move. When the traffic was light, he could hear her breathe. His room seemed small.

He left the apartment with two books under his arm and walked to the library. He returned the books and selected two others. He then started for the apartment, but after a few blocks he changed his route to a drug store. After making a few purchases, he walked briskly back to his room.

She was not in bed when he entered, and for a moment he thought she had left. His demeanor dipped, and he dejectedly set the books and the bag on the counter. Then he heard a sound in the bathroom, and soon thereafter, she entered the room wearing one of his shirts and a pair of his shorts. He could not help but smile. Though still thin, more so than he had previously imagined, she seemed now entirely alive, while before she had had an almost otherworldly appearance to her, as if a small part of who she was had already died. She smiled too, that same pure smile.

“I hope you don’t mind.” She said touching the shirt with her fingers.

“Of course not.”

“After taking a shower, I just did not want to put back on those same, dirty, clothes.” Her spirit seemed to dampen a little with mention of the clothes.

“I bought you some socks.” He said, removing the purchase from the bag. He too was uncomfortable with the subject. “Did you eat?” He asked as he handed her the socks.

“I’m afraid I ate all your fruit, but you didn’t have much else. All I found was potatoes and flour. Thank you.” She added as she put on a pair of the socks.

“That’s pretty much all I eat. Food is not very important to me. If you’re still hungry, I can make some soup.”

“Yes, please.”

He moved into the kitchen and set water to boil in the pot again. The girl sat at one of the two table chairs and stared out the window, glancing now and then at the young man as he mixed dough, salt and water to make dumplings and then dropped them in the boiling water, which he seasoned with bullion. He also added three sliced potatoes. He then set the kettle to boil.

“Would you like some tea?”

“Yes, please.”

He searched through the cupboards a moment for a second mug and washed it out. By then the kettle sounded, and he filled the cups with boiling water. He turned the heat down on the soup and then joined the girl, setting the two cups, two spoons and a honey bear on the table. She smiled briefly, added some honey to her tea and then continued to stare out the window as she sipped from the mug. The young man likewise stared out the window, though he a few times turned briefly toward the girl. At last she turned to him.

“My name is Luann.” She held out her hand.

“Marcine.” They shook hands.

“Thank you, Marcine.” There were a thousand thanks in that one thank you. Thank you for helping. Thank you for being there, for whatever reason, in the middle of the night to hear my feverish dream and not for walking past as assuredly so many others would have done. Thank you for the bed. For the food. The peace. For your kindness. For not taking advantage of me when I was the most vulnerable ever I have been. And for a thousand other reasons you may never know, both simple and grand. Thank you.

“You’re welcome.” Then they were silent. Marcine went to the kitchen and returned with two bowls of soup. Luann ate ravenously, and when she finished, Marcine refilled her bowl. She ate this bowl more slowly, and when it was finished arose and filled the kettle herself before setting it on to boil. She stood in the kitchen until it was done and then filled both mugs with hot water. When she sat down, she sighed and turned to her chair to face Marcine instead of the window.

“Why were you out last night?” She asked with her mug raised halfway to her mouth.

“I was taking a walk before I went to bed.”

“Do you always go to bed so late?”

“It depends. I have no schedule. I sleep when I am tired. Sometimes I don’t sleep for days.”

They were silent again. Marcine began to feel awkward, but then he decided, while there were many subjects he felt unable to broach, there were things they needed to discuss.

“Is there anything you want to talk about?” She blushed at the question and answered without looking at him.

“I don’t want to trouble you anymore than I have.”

“You have not troubled me. I doubt you could. But if you do not want to talk, I understand. It’s just that; well, there’s sadness in your face.”

She looked at him with a relaxed countenance, a tear rimming on her left eye. Her cheeks were flushed, and her cracked lips were moist.

“I am so weak.” She said in almost a whisper. “Why are you being so kind? I do not deserve it. I...I.” The words drifted. She seemed to be fighting with herself. At length, she swallowed and then spoke. “If you don’t mind, I should sleep. But this time, I’ll sleep on the floor. It’s your bed.”

“Nonsense. I’ll be up for hours anyway.”

“You sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Well, if you’re sure. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight Luann.”

She smiled halfheartedly in return and walked to the bed. Within minutes she was asleep, and Marcine turned to the window in consideration of all that had happened. After a while, he cleaned the dishes and went to the store to buy some fruit and vegetables. He also bought some hamburger and bread. When he returned to the room, she was tossing in her sleep.

Chapter Four

Luann was already awake when Marcine woke up the next morning. She sat at the table reading one of the books he had gotten at the library.

“Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve just sat and read a book?” She said after they exchanged good mornings.

Marcine did not answer but gazed pleasantly at her face. She seemed cleaner, brighter; as if before she had been broken but now stood whole. Her hair was combed. Her face seemed a little more full. He could not but bask in her reviving beauty.

“I used to read a lot when I was a child.” Luann continued when he did not respond. “Books always set me free.” She hesitated. “I miss that life. I have for a long time.” She set the book down and sighed. “If a year ago you had been told I would be shivering on a doorstep night after night, I would have never believed you. But as it happened, I did not consider it. I thought of very little; of food, of solitude. So many hours I have walked without a thought in my head, tired but unwilling to sit on the sidewalk and be stared at, judged. But

once I sat likewise once, I no longer balked at it. For so long I would not beg, yet once the hand stretched out, it would not rescind. There is a darkness that fills the mind when you fall so far. It clutches you and makes you wretched. Yet, though you know you are wretched, you are not aware of it. The conscience becomes distant. Reality becomes vague. The people passing seem like ghosts; the money they give a pittance. Language dissolves. The clerk selling bread becomes a blur. The food, once eaten, vanishes from the mind. Memory becomes corrupt. I remember trying for three days to recall my sister's name. It was like attempting to reach across a barrier to another world. I don't know if I ever remembered. But I do now. Roslyn. She's sixteen, I think."

While speaking, her face had become melancholy. Her eyes drooped, and the light which had risen within waned. Marcine attempted to comprehend the many feelings which must have crowded her mind. He could not. It seemed she had resolved to tell him the things she had avoided the night before, but now that the conversation had arrived, she hesitated.

"How long has it been since you've seen her?" Marcine asked cautiously.

"More than four years." She looked out the window and continued. It was raining. "It was my first year in college, and my family came up for my nineteenth birthday. Things were good then. It was amazing how much she had grown in the months I had been gone. I might not recognize her if I was to see her now." Neither of them spoke for a moment. Then Luann sighed and leaned back on her chair. "I started smoking marijuana a few months after I began college. I had tried it a few times in high school, but in college I smoked every day, whether or not anyone was with me. And it felt good, most of the time. There were times though, I looked in the mirror and almost did not recognize myself. It was weird, but it always passed. I suppose I became that stranger I saw at first. Who I used to be simply disappeared.

"Then one night, my roommate gave me some acid. God, what a trip that was, but I promised myself I would never take it again. I would never do anything worse than weed. But when the hand offered, I always accepted what came next. Ecstasy. LSD. Mushrooms. I tried them all. I flew, my mind so far from myself. Reality seemed to disappear. Then heroin. What a rush it was the first time the needle filled my veins. It felt as if my body had never before been alive. Nothing mattered anymore; only that feeling."

She smiled in recollection of her past high and then shook her head as if in shame.

"I lost my job when I did not show up for work three days in a row. What did I care? I felt good. My money ran out. I sold things. My stereo. My clothes. I got evicted. I still did not care. I still had my drug. I had stopped going to school altogether. I lived in my car. The world was so distant. I ran out of money again. I pleaded with my dealer to help me. He laughed. He did not care. But, to help me for a day, he gave me one dose for free, because, he said, I had been such a good customer. When I shot up, I barely felt anything. It drove me mad. I needed more. A lot more. So I sold my car.

“I remember crying as I walked away from the dealership with my money. My parents bought that car on my sixteenth birthday.” She smiled. “I remember that day vividly. My sister, she wasn’t even ten yet, woke me up laughing, jumping on my bed. I threw a pillow at her. She picked it up and hit me. We began to wrestle. I won easily and began to tickle her.” She paused. “I can hear her giggling now.” Another smile. “We went downstairs. The table was spread magnificently for breakfast, and behind stood my parents, smiling. We did not really talk during the meal, but I remember feeling close to my family, more so, perhaps, than ever before or after. Then I went upstairs to get ready for school. When I came down, they were all standing in the kitchen waiting for me. My dad asked me if I wanted a ride to school. I said yes, and he told me to go get in the car; he would be there in a minute. I opened the door to the garage and began laughing. I think I jumped up and down awhile before running to the new car. It had a bow on it and a big sign saying, ‘Happy Birthday, Luann.’ I hugged my parents a dozen times. They were so happy. I was so happy.”

It took a moment for the happiness to recede from her eyes, but it did, and in its place fell tears. Marcine put his hand on her shoulder and gently rubbed it. She looked at him and smiled weakly. After a few minutes, she had recovered herself and continued speaking.

“I sold my car a little more than nine months ago. It wasn’t that bad at first. I had money enough to buy food and heroine, even to rent a dirty room from my dealer. God, he sucked me dry. Five weeks ago, I ran out of money. Again I pleaded for help. He said he would let me stay, and supply my cravings, if I worked for him. I knew what that meant. He wanted me to be a whore.” Her eyes filled with disgust, although there was a lingering look which revealed just how close she had come to accepting his offer.

“I walked into the streets. I considered going home. I wanted to, but how could I? I had no money. I begged but earned scarce enough to supply my habit, let alone eat or attempt to go anywhere. I was lost, so desperately lost. The world had ceased to be real. Sometimes I stared at the sea and wanted to swim into it until I could swim no more. But I could not. Something would change. Something would come along. But nothing did, until you.”

She looked at him with a thankful smile and took his hand in hers.

“There is one more thing I would ask of you.” She said earnestly.

“Anything.”

In his hand she placed a small bag of heroin and needles.

“Set me free.”

Chapter Five

Luann groaned as she turned feverishly in bed. Marcine sat beside her, attempting to take her temperature. He had never known such anguish as she had faced in the tortures of withdrawal. Her face was pallid; her eyelids disheveled. Her legs kicked the covers off. Then she sat up and curled herself against the wall, staring with childlike eyes at Marcine, as if she had never before seen him or the apartment they were in. Then pain overwhelmed her face, and she fell writhing onto the bed, still curled up, her knees pinning her arms against her chest. She dry heaved. Marcine held her hair back, in case something did come out, but he did not expect anything. She had not been able to keep anything down for nearly two days. She had also not slept in that time.

“This has to be the worst of it.” He thought. “If not, I will have to take her to a doctor. It’s too much.” She suddenly ran to the bathroom. “At least she was aware enough to do that. This must be terrible for her.” A feeling of pity ran through his body, and it made him sad. It always made him sad to see people unhappy, but never before had he experienced so closely how painful life can be.

She staggered back to bed and collapsed. Her eyelids fluttered as if she was on the verge of either sleep or unconsciousness, but she remained awake, slightly moaning. He wet a washcloth with warm water and softly dabbed her face. A brief smile crossed her face, and then she screamed and retreated beneath the bedclothes. Tears creased his eyes as he looked upon her cowering in the blankets. He could do nothing, he knew, but how he wanted to help her fight the demons now clouding round her mind. He turned his stereo on quietly. Soft music played. Luann poked her head out of the blankets. She was shaking. It made him think of a wet kitten shivering in the cold. He walked to her and sat on the bed. She moved closer to him, and he wrapped his arms around her. He kissed her on the forehead and looked in her eyes. His own still were wet.

“You weep for me?” She asked in a timid, almost unbelieving voice.

“Yes.”

A kind smile lighted on her face for a moment before vanishing in the contortions of nausea. Marcine held her closer and continued to weep, but in the back of his mind was forming the beautiful realization that he was in love.

She seemed less tormented while cradled in his arms, and after a few hours of such warm embrace, she finally found the unconscious bliss of slumber. Still he held her in his arms and wished away the terror which haunted her. Gradually, her sleep became more peaceful. She ceased muttering unintelligible syllables. Her breathing became more even. She no longer shivered. He lay her down and covered her with the last clean blankets.

He felt her forehead; it still burned warm, but within a few hours it seemed to have broken. Her sleep by then was silent, her breath almost inaudible. He felt her pulse. It was languid but harmless.

Finally, he sat at his table and watched her sleep. Though he also had been awake for two days, he did not feel like sleeping. His thoughts moved too quickly for the weariness of his body to make itself known. First upon his mind was the concept of love.

He could not help but doubt the feeling. Then he remembered her smile as she realized he wept because of her suffering. But, would he not have wept had he witnessed any person suffering so? No. It had been years since he cried. But he had never seen anyone bear such pain. Perhaps he was in love with saving her. He had always dreamed of such a thing; to be like a knight-errand helping the damsel in distress. Besides, he had always believed that when he fell in love, he would know the feeling with certainty. They, also, had yet to live. The entire time he had known Luann, it seemed he had been keeping her from dying rather than experiencing life with her. He did not know how she dreamed or what she sought in life. He did not know her. But he knew her smile. He knew the pain he felt to watch her suffer. Never before had he pitied someone so much or felt such a desire to help. He did not know, he concluded, whether he loved her. Plainly, he did not know what love was. He knew only that when she smiled at him, it made him happy. When she was happy, it made him feel good. But that was nothing new; the happiness of others had always brought him joy.

Chapter Six

She slept for almost two days. When she awakened, she was confused for a moment before remembering where she lay. She looked around the room. Marcine was asleep by the kitchen table. He murmured in his sleep. Sitting up in bed, she considered the days she had passed with him and found herself smiling. Then she wondered a great many things; of what he had done for her, of what he might feel for her and, lastly, what she felt for him. There was something, she concluded, but the situation was simply too odd to accurately read her feelings. She did not know him, only that he was kind. She knew nothing of the life he had lived, only that, whatever it was, it had been set aside to help her. But what if he felt nothing more than pity? She could not love someone that did not love her. But it was peaceful here, with him. But she had nothing to offer him. She had nothing. The clothes she wore were his. The food she ate was his. Still, he did not seem to mind. And then she remembered him weeping as she suffered. Yes, he cared, but she could not live entirely by his

providence. What if he disowned her? She would be back on the street. No, she would have to make it on her own a little while first. She would go home. Then, when she had straightened her life out, she would return to him, and they would see. It would be best that way.

And so, careful not to wake Marcine, she gathered her few things and slipped out the door, pausing only briefly to scratch a short note and set it on the table.

A little while later, Marcine awoke and quickly discovered himself alone. Setting eyes upon the note, he hesitated, afraid of the words inscribed within. He set the note down and made himself breakfast. While he ate, he stared at the paper. The remainder of the day, he avoided it. He did the laundry. He washed dishes. He went for a jog and did everything he could to not think about Luann. It did not work. Every moment they had spent together replayed within his mind, and he searched for some reason, some fault of his, that might have driven her away. But he could find nothing, only his curious thoughts and the lingering question of whether he had fallen in love.

At last, as the evening plunged into blackness, he sat down at the table and picked up the note. He closed his eyes and opened the paper. His eyes widened and he read.

“I will never be able to repay your kindness. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Luann.”

That was it. He read it again, a dozen times. And so she was gone.

“Perhaps she will come back,” he thought. He felt as though she was gone forever. Disappointed, he lay in bed and tried to sleep; tried to make his mind empty. It did not work.



Three weeks later Luann knocked on Marcine’s door. There was no answer, even after the third attempt. Her nerves eased a bit as she turned from the room. She turned back and knocked one more time. The door across the hall opened, and a man of about thirty-five looked out. Seeing Luann, he entered the hallway.

“You looking for Marcine?” He asked.

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid he’s moved.”

“No.” Luann leaned against the wall. She had not expected this. Why, of course he was there. He had to be. “Do you know where?”

“He said something about traveling. I think Europe. I’m not sure though.”

She sank against the wall, her head shaking from side to side.

“Are you okay?” The man asked.

“He’s gone.” She replied. She looked up. The man stood unmoving, confused, sympathetic. “I waited too long.” She smiled sadly and asked with remorse, “Have you ever been in love?”

Chapter Seven

Marcine sat in a small Paris cafe sipping at a glass of wine while he waited to order. He had been in France for three weeks. Before that he had spent eleven days in England. He sat back as he realized how long he had been gone. The actual length seemed a trifle compared to the distance his thoughts had traveled.

He closed his eyes, and a line of images streamed through his mind. First to call was the grand castle in Wales where he had spent four splendid nights imagining himself an English gentleman. Such a pleasant life it was too, striking out after breakfast astride a chestnut mare and riding leisurely until late afternoon through open green pastures lined with trees and shrubs. Though they were not there, he could almost hear the lambs bleating and the baying of foxhounds. Then there was the gentle hamlet beneath the castle and the stone bridge arcing gracefully over a languid stream. He remembered two young school children, a boy and a girl, waving happily as he passed along the bridge. Merrily they laughed as they played innocent games at the water’s edge. Then at dusk, the myriads of birds dashing amongst the trees; harbingers, it seemed, of the coming rainbow which announced the setting of the sun. Dreams of Merlin, fauns and fairies. Remembrances of poets and visionaries.

The clamor of London nearly overwhelmed him after that, but still he did his best to enjoy his time. He visited the museums and tourist traps, but he took much more from the city in the days he walked alone along the Thames or the empty thoroughfares at night. Memories of literature and history mingled in his mind, and vainly he attempted to envision the city in the time of Shakespeare, King Richard or even its tattered days of World War II. History, while still remnant in small amounts, had been overcome by industry. Yet it lived.

Fondly did he recall the afternoon he spent in a teahouse listening to an elderly woman tell her history of England’s royalty. Her eyes were proud when she spoke of the good monarchs, while equally ashamed when she briefly mentioned the tyrants. She also spoke about the war and the many she had known that either died or were distinctly changed. She too had been changed, although she had been a young girl at the time. Still she had nightmares in which the bombs fell never-ending from the sky.

“One night,” she told him, “during the worst of it, we were all huddled on the first floor of our building. The explosions were close. I remember I was

sitting with my mother and my sister. My grandfather was standing by the window, watching the planes fly overhead. They were that close. I looked out once; they seemed like kites flying through a storm. It seemed like there were hundreds of them. Then there was an explosion, and my grandfather was thrown to the ground. His face was bleeding from the broken window. In the street I heard people yelling. I looked out. The building across the street was on fire.” She did not speak for awhile, her eyes showing plainly that the memories now playing were hers alone. Her face was blank. At length she spoke. “Thank the Lord for all those brave boys that died to protect us.” And with that the subject was closed. They spoke for awhile of common things, awkwardly as always people do after such conversation, and then she left him with a warm squeeze of the hand and a serious look in the eye which seemed to say, “Remember what I have told you. If ever such a threat should arise again, I am counting on you and those like you to be strong for me and those like me, just like my father and those like him were strong for us then.”

“Monsieur,” the waiter’s voice recalled him from his reverie, “are you ready to order?”

“Yes. I’ll have the soup and a chicken salad. And another glass of wine.”

“Anything else?”

“Thank you, no.”

The waiter disappeared into the back of the restaurant. In a moment he returned with the wine, and then he greeted an elderly couple at the table beside Marcine. The waiter pleasantly rattled off the days specials and then waited for a response.

“Thank you,” the old man said after a moment. He spoke French with a thick German accent. “Give us a few minutes.” The waiter left, and he began to speak in German. “He speaks too fast; I can’t understand.”

“That’s okay, honey. We can order off the menu.”

“I can’t understand most of it either. It’s been more than fifty years since I’ve spoken the language. I’m just glad they speak German at the hotel.”

“Excuse me.” Marcine said in German. He rose from his table and approached the couple. “Would you like some help?”

“Thank you, yes.” The man responded, and then Marcine translated the menu and specials, as well as he could remember them. The waiter returned, and he helped them order.

“Thank you very much young man.” The man said as soon as the waiter left. “My name is Karl,” he put out his hand, “and this is my wife Heidi.”

“Marcine.” He shook hands with both. “What brings you to Paris?”

“It’s our fiftieth anniversary.” Heidi answered.

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you.” She continued. “This trip was a gift from our children; a week in Paris, a week in Rome and a week in Tuscany.”

“I speak Italian better than French.” Karl added, smiling. He had a thin face, and his cheek bones protruded when he smiled. He was also bald. “What of you? Why are you in Paris?”

“Just traveling,” Marcine answered, “seeing the world.”

“Where did you learn the languages?” Heidi asked.

“I learned German in college, and I learned French while living in French Guinea.”

“What on earth were you doing there?” She asked with a curious look. Heidi seemed younger than Karl, although she still must have been in her seventies. He might have been as old as ninety.

“I taught English for a year.” The waiter was placing Marcine’s food at his table. All three noticed. “It has been a pleasure.” He offered his hand.

“Yes,” said Karl, shaking his hand, “thank you again”

“Enjoy your meal.” Heidi added as they shook hands.

“Thank you. You also.” He returned to his table and began with the soup. He could hear Heidi and Karl talking at their table, as well as a dozen conversations in French. The restaurant was full. Then he heard voices in English. Instinctively he looked up. At the host’s counter were two women, one middle aged, one younger. The younger one was frantically flipping through a French phrase book while the host spoke. He seemed upset. Marcine walked to the counter and addressed the man in French. “Would you like some help?”

“Yes!” His face was flushed. “Tell these stupid Americans to learn French before they come to France.” He shook his head in exasperation. “Every day they come here. Every day. Sure, they spend lots of money, but boy are they ignorant. Not like you. You at least try to speak French. You don’t succeed, but you try.” He was smiling. “Seriously, tell them it’s a forty-five minute wait.”

Marcine turned to the women. They seemed a little upset, but mostly embarrassed, especially the young one. She was perhaps twenty-five, and her face, while not beautiful, was kind. She resembled the older woman. They both wore expensive looking but simple dresses. The daughter’s white with red flowers, the mother’s green.

“It will be forty-five minutes until a table opens,” Marcine addressed the mother in English, “or, if you would like, you and your daughter can share my table. I’ve just gotten to eat.”

The mother sighed in relief, while the daughter blushed. The mother spoke. “Thank you; if you don’t mind our company.”

“I look forward to it.” He turned to the host and informed him of the arrangement.

“Good.” Said the host. “Get them out of my hair.” He smiled again. “I’ll let Jean know.”

Marcine led them to the table. “The waiter will be here in a minute.” He said after they were seated. “Do you want anything to drink?”

“Some wine would be nice.” The mother answered.

Jean arrived with a menu. "Do you need me to go over the specials again?"
"No, but I'll take a bottle of this wine and two more glasses. Then some more bread."

"Right away."

Marcine turned to the ladies. "Do you have an idea of what you want?"

"That salad looks good." The mother replied. "Is that chicken?"

"Yes."

"I'll have that. What do you want Dorothea?"

"I just want a sandwich. Roast beef or pastrami; it doesn't matter, just as long as there is no mayonnaise."

Jean returned with the bread and wine. Marcine began to order.

"Did you want soup as well?" He said, turning to the mother.

"No, just the salad will be fine."

He finished ordering and then poured the wine. At last he sat back and smiled. Then, as if remembering something, he sat forward.

"My name is Marcine."

"Sadie Wells." The mother responded, reaching across the table to shake hands. "This is my daughter Dorothea."

"Dorothy." The daughter amended. There was silence for moment while they began to eat and drink. Dorothy was first to speak. "That man was upset with us, wasn't he?"

"Who, the host? No, he's just a little tired of people coming here that don't speak any French. I can understand though. How would you like it if people visited America and expected you to speak their language?"

"That's true. I feel kind of bad about it. It's only for a few days though. My brother is flying in on Saturday, and he speaks French."

"He's supposed to be here now, but he was called away on business." Sadie said with annoyance. Then with pride. "He's a lawyer."

"What do you do?" Dorothy asked.

"I live."

"One hardly gets paid for that." Sadie said somewhat harshly.

"No, but one enjoys life." Marcine smiled. "I used to be a painter, among other things."

"As in an artist?" Dorothy asked somewhat hopefully.

"Yes. I had a little studio where I worked and sold my paintings. I did well too, but I got burned out. It ceases to be art when you paint as much as I did. It felt like I was working a production line. Anyway, I made enough money that I no longer have to work."

Jean appeared with the ladies' food and talk turned briefly to the meal before Marcine was politely pulled aside by Karl and Heidi to help them order dessert. This task finished, Marcine returned to his table. Dorothy and Sadie had been talking quietly while he was away, and after he sat down, Dorothy, blushing, asked Marcine if he would accompany them to the Louvre the

following morning. They had an extra ticket, and it was too late to change their reservation. So if he wasn't busy, they would appreciate his company, especially because he spoke French, although it did not matter as much there, and because he was an artist, although that was not the only reason she, they, wanted him to come.

When he said he would be delighted, she blushed again and smiled briefly before looking at the table. Marcine noticed all this and wondered how the conversation might have gone had her mother not been present. To avoid more awkwardness, he asked Sadie for the details of the outing; the time, where they should meet and such. About the time they decided they would meet for breakfast at the same restaurant, Karl and Heidi paused at the table to again thank Marcine for his help. As they parted, the bill arrived, and Marcine, despite a mild protest from Sadie, paid. They then parted until the following morning.

Chapter Eight

Such is the world of today that a traveler can sit in a Paris hotel and listen to music from Uzbekistan while he reads alternately two books, one written in England, one in Lebanon, drinks tea from Tibet sweetened with Canadian honey and eats fruit from New Zealand, Brazil and Turkey, while wearing clothes manufactured in Indonesia, Bangladesh and India and shoes crafted in China. A few centuries past, even the most wealthy would have struggled to compile such a list. Such is progress. Such is commerce.

Marcine sat as such, but his mind would not focus on the pages before him. A line in one of the books mentioned both war and death, and these in turn drew his thoughts into reminiscence.

Two weeks earlier he had been standing on beach in Normandy, gazing across the English Channel. The sky was cloudy, gray, and the waves chopped with a mild wind. And though it had been more than sixty years, he could feel death still lingering. He closed his eyes, and he could almost hear the terrible screams of drowning men, gunfire and exploding mines. Echoes of blood teased his senses. It was around him, the war; tugging at his humanity. He opened his eyes. The beach was quiet, except for the distant laughter of a child running forth and back before the waves and the ever-present murmur of the waves themselves. He turned from the water and gazed upon empty hills that once rained bullets. He looked at the sky and tried to forget the sadness which had risen within. He could not. Some things are simply too real to push away.

Later, he stood before his grandfather's grave. There was an eerie silence in the place; the white crosses standing motionlessly in sterile lines of death. But

they once were life; each of them. He felt like kneeling before every grave and asking, "What would you have done if you had not died?" And then it hit him; these before him were but a few that died. And then he wept and asked aloud, "Why?" Why is there war? Why are men so easily led to cruelty? Why?

In his hotel room, he set aside his books and fruit and looked blankly at nothing. He felt down, and after a few minutes feeling as such, he left his room and headed to the hotel lounge. He ordered a whiskey at the bar, downed it and then ordered a cognac.

"Hallo Marcine." A friendly hand grasped him on the shoulder. "Would you care to join me?" It was Karl.

"Certainly." Marcine said emotionlessly. "Are you at this hotel?"

"Yes." They seated themselves at a table. Karl was drinking a dark beer. "You are as well, I assume."

"Yes." Marcine did not feel like small talk.

"You seem down. Is everything okay?"

"It's nothing. I was just reading and one of the books stirred up some memories."

"Ah, yes, memories. Believe me, young man, I understand. May I ask what dampens your thoughts? It may help us both to talk."

Marcine looked at him for a moment and found comfort in Karl's face. "Normandy."

"It has brought many spirits down, including my own. My brother was killed there."

"So was my grandfather."

They were silent, gazing at each other with empathy. Marcine knew his own sorrow was much less, but this did not make him feel better. They finished their drinks, and Karl motioned to a waitress.

"A bottle of cognac for me and my young friend." He said when she arrived, and then to Marcine. "Let us drink and remember those that have died, and, if you will listen, I will speak to you of things I have never spoken of. I have carried these sorrows for a lifetime, but now that I near the end, it seems appropriate, if for the only time, to share them."

The waitress returned with the bottle and a glass for Karl. Karl poured two full glasses and then sat back. The room was dark, and close though he was, Marcine could barely discern Karl, except for his face, which was lit by a candle in the center of the table.

"It was a strange time in Germany back then, even before the war." He took a long drink before continuing. His eyes seemed to be sifting through various memories. "I was in the university when the army took me. They made me a pilot, an officer. My brother had just graduated secondary school. He was eighteen. They put him in the infantry.

"We were no Nazis. I remember them strutting around at school. God, I despised them. I knew they were bad for the country, lots of people did, but not

enough to do anything. Once they were in power, no one could do anything. Besides, they began to turn people. The country had been bad off for quite awhile, and they actually did improve a lot of things. Enough at least that everyone accepted their increasing power; the good with the bad, you know.

“Personally, I didn’t pay too much attention to politics. I was too busy studying. But what I did see, I did not like. Hitler was a power hungry and hate filled man. I saw it, but most others did not. I will admit, though, that he was a powerful speaker. I remember listening to him on the radio. He made you love Germany. He made you willing to do anything for the Fatherland. When he blamed the Jews, hate stirred within. He knew how to feed the mob. I always felt ashamed afterwards, knowing that I had allowed his words to rouse me. What had the Jews ever done to me? Nothing. What had they done to anyone? Nothing to deserve what we did to them.

“Thank God I never had to work in one of those camps. I would have gone insane, or worse, I might have done everything they asked of me. I knew guys that ended up working in those places. They were normal guys, but God knows the things they did; how many innocent people they killed and watched starve to death. I know one guy killed himself after the war. I spoke to another one back in the mid fifties. His eyes were dead.

“But those were nothing. I interned at a mental hospital in forty-seven. We had quite a few of them there; guys screaming the entire night, hallucinations. I think they had ceased to be human when they worked at those camps, and for some of them, the transition back to humanity simple destroyed their minds. I remember one of more docile patients saying that he simply could not overcome his grief. All those tears he should have shed as he watched and took part in those wretched crimes flowed each night as the images replayed before his eyes. He could be heard shouting, ‘No! Let them go. Let them live.’

“Shortly before my internship was over, he told me that when he had lived through that time, he had not thought, simply acted. The cruelty spread, even to the Jews themselves. The guards would kill people and laugh about it. They beat people for any reason. They were beasts, he said, worse than beasts, for what creature but man had ever been so wretched? Then one day came, when he was a Russian prisoner, and he was a man again. He said it was like awakening from a long nightmare, except that it was not a dream and he had been the monster. He implored the Russians to kill him, he tried to kill himself, but he lived and would do so for many years in constant torment. But even he realized that such suffering was good. It meant he was human again. Others, however, never ceased to be beasts, or perhaps they were born so. Either way, such creatures have walked among us without guilt or shame, laughing at memories of torture and death, desiring still that they had had time to finish their act. And what frightens me the most is that there are fiends such as these born still, and should ever such a hateful regime again rise to power, again shall their hands be harbingers of death and sorrow. It has happened in Cambodia

and Rwanda. It happened previously in the Americas with the Natives. Wherever there is a policy of hate, there will be sadistic creatures to undertake all sins with pleasure.”

A mystified look covered Karl’s face. Marcine refilled their glasses, and Karl continued.

“As I said, I was a pilot during the war. I was okay with it at first; we bombed other armies. I guess, at the time, I had distanced myself enough to not become burdened by the death dropped from my plane. I simply flew the missions. But when we started bombing England; it was different. I could not look upon London burning in our wake without knowing that somewhere in the flames and rubble were people dead and dying who were not soldiers. Then I came to the terrible realization that those soldiers I had killed before, and thought so little of, were mostly men such as I, fighting not by choice but simply because no alternative existed. These people had not harmed me. They had not harmed the German people. One could say that I lost faith in war.

“But what could I do? I felt myself fading; my life torn between the reality of my actions and the terror of the consequences of those actions. I was helpless, sad. I began to drink every night. I was reprimanded, but still they sent me off to kill. I considered many things, all of which would have ended with my death. Thankfully fate prevented me from taking any action.

“On a mission over London, I was shot down. I broke both legs in the crash. Everyone else was killed, but though I knew the men well, I little cared about their deaths. They were just a few more on the pile.

“I told the British everything. They cared for my wounds, and because I cooperated they left me fairly well alone to heal. By the time I left the hospital, the war was nearing its end. I shattered my collarbone in the crash, and for a long time I did not have full movement in my right arm. Even now, if the climate is right, I feel a little pain in my shoulder. I also lost one of my kidneys and part of my liver. I owe my life to those British doctors. I, who had killed so many.”

The old man poured the last of the cognac and swallowed it. He shook his head and sighed. Then he leaned over the table and looked Marcine directly in the eye.

“I should have done something; we all should have. Too many people died. Too many good men. God, how my dreams have haunted me all these years. I should have done something.”

His eyes bore tears, and his face was long with a lifetime of suffering and doubt. Marcine was silent. Nothing he had ever known compared to the things this man had witnessed. Never had death been so near as to haunt his every action and to ask whether he had lived life more meaningful than would have those destroyed by his payloads. Not once had he stared blankly at a wall and seen the eyes of corpses and children never born; lovers to whom no one ever

returned home. His life had been empty of strife, yet, looking within Karl's mournful gaze, he understood, a little.

"You know, I lost my faith in God during that time and have spent the rest of my life trying to regain it. Never lose your faith, Marcine; never. It is more important to a man than anything." Karl stood and walked by Marcine, pausing only momentarily to press Marcine's shoulder warmly with his hand and whisper, "Goodnight and God bless."

Chapter Nine

Marcine, Dorothy and Sadie ate breakfast on the patio, where they could watch the foot traffic and soak in both the sun and a gentle breeze. The conversation was pleasant but halting, especially when Marcine and Dorothy began to speak. Dorothy was guarded and repeatedly, after glancing at her mother, answered Marcine's questions with monosyllabic answers. Thus, Sadie did most of the talking. She spoke of her son and briefly her husband, whom had passed away a few years earlier from cancer. She spoke also of Dorothy. She was twenty-four, having recently graduated with a master's in anthropology. Sadie's eyes rolled just a little when she said this, as if she had hoped for something more concrete from her daughter; something like a lawyer, like her son. Marcine wondered if she had told Dorothy such things. Dorothy did not seem to notice the tinge of irony in her mother's voice, but perhaps she was used to it. At any rate, it was little of his business.

When the bill came, Sadie paid, and then they were off to the museum. In the taxi, they spoke very little, and through the first exhibits the quiet remained. Marcine scarcely noticed his company as he moved amongst the art. He was used to visiting such places on his own. Then, after an hour or so, Sadie decided she needed to rest, but she encouraged Marcine and Dorothy to go on ahead and she would meet them at one of the restaurants for dinner.

They walked awhile in silence, and Marcine, still absorbed in the art, paid little attention to Dorothy and scarcely noticed her awkward glances and brief beginnings of questions she never managed to ask. Finally, as they stood before a painting Marcine could not decide if he liked, Dorothy asked him what he thought of the painting.

"I don't know." He replied. "Its quality is okay, but it's missing something. I guess, if it was anywhere else it would seem a nice painting, but in this building, it seems quite plain. What do you think?"

"I like it," she replied with a meek voice, "but you know more about art than I do."

Marcine laughed a little and turned towards her. She was still looking at the painting.

“Where did you get an idea like that?” He said amused.

“Because you are a painter.” She turned towards him a little and looked at his face. Marcine noticed something in her eyes which might have been affection, but he dismissed it and continued with a topic which had always bothered him.

“Okay, so I paint; that means nothing as to whether you like a piece of art.” She turned to him completely, and then they moved to a bench and sat down. “Art is entirely individual, or at least it should be, both in making it and enjoying it. It has always bothered me when people try to tell others what is good art and what is bad art. Granted, there is much art I do not like, but that in no way means that others will not. There is no artist that will please everyone, but of course the true artist is not trying to. Yes, there are pieces of art that are superior to others in technique or are better examples of certain styles, but still if to your eye they lack something or are not beautiful, it means simply they are not to your taste. There is nothing wrong with that. In fact, it is good. It would be better if more people decided for themselves what they liked instead of listening to what the so called experts say. That’s true of many things, not just art.”

“Like food.” Dorothy answered. “I remember eating at a restaurant where all the food critics lauded a certain dish. I forget what it was, but my family went there and we all had it. It was awful, and I know for a fact I wasn’t the only one that thought so, but everyone else ate it and pretended to think it was wonderful. I’ve just never thought of art in the same way.”

Now they had spoken, they conversed easily as they moved through the remainder of the museum. They spoke mostly of the exhibits, art and anthropology, and they laughed and were merry. A little too merry Marcine realized when they stood before the Venus de Milo and he could feel her warmth beside him. He glanced sideways at Dorothy. She was glowing, and it suddenly made him uneasy. He did not move away, nor did it seem that she noticed, but his relaxed pose tightened. Could she possibly be falling in love with him? No, he told himself. But as they walked toward the restaurant to meet Sadie and Dorothy took his arm in hers and rested her head on his shoulder, he knew she was beginning to feel something.

At dinner, he spoke almost exclusively to Sadie, even though he felt cruel for doing so. Still, when he did look toward Dorothy, he saw in her eyes that she thought nothing wrong in his behavior. And when Sadie, nearing the end of dinner, asked Marcine how long he intended to stay in Paris, Dorothy’s eyes widened, as if the event was something frightening.

“Not much longer.” He answered. “I’ve already stayed longer than I intended.” It was a lie. He had had no definite plans since he began his trip.

“Well, if you’re still here when my son arrives, you must meet him.”

“Yes, of course.” Then, looking once more at Dorothy, he decided to extract himself from the situation. He looked at his watch, and then with feigned surprise said, “I did not realize it was so late. I’m sorry, but I must go.”

Sadie looked at her own watch, and replied with what seemed real surprise, “Why the time has gotten on, hasn’t it. We’ll need to hurry if we want to change for the opera, Dorothea. Marcine, if you’re free we have an extra ticket. It’s supposed to be an amazing performance.”

“Thank you, but I have plans. And it is. I saw it last week.”

They had risen from the table.

“Very well, would you like to share a cab?”

“Thank you, no. I’m just going a few blocks so I’ll walk. Thank you again for the ticket to the museum. I’ve had a lovely time.” Which was true.

“Good evening Marcine.” Sadie shook his hand with a polite smile.

“Goodbye.” Dorothy said as she shook his hand with an affectionate smile. “We’ll be in touch.”

“Goodbye.”

As they entered their cab, Dorothy turned back with a smile and waved at Marcine. It made him feel guilty. But maybe he was imagining things. Maybe she was just glad to have someone to talk to. But no, there was definitely feeling in her looks and smiles. But why did that make him uneasy? Why did he suddenly feel like leaving Paris? True, he felt nothing for her, but that she did for him; what fault was that of his? He had merely been nice to her. That was all. He would have to tell her the truth. But what if he was wrong. He was not wrong. But why tell her. It would be better, and easier, if he just left.

Such were his thoughts as he walked back to his hotel and for the second night in a row found himself in the lounge. This time, however, he had no one to distract his thoughts, and he continued to consider the situation for many hours. At last, when he had nearly fallen asleep, he laughed a little at it. Then, he stopped. His thoughts had turned to Luann, and he realized he had not thought of her for many days. When he first set out on his trip, she had haunted his dreams without end. He wondered if, after he had gone, his visage would likewise haunt Dorothy in the guise of someone who might have been.

Chapter Ten

When Marcine returned from breakfast the following morning, there were three messages from Dorothy, politely asking him to call her. He did not. Instead he set about packing his luggage and preparing to leave. While he did this, the telephone rang another two times. He did not answer, but when he

checked out of the hotel, he was told that the same woman had called twice more. He thought for a moment to call her, to see her and tell her the truth. But in the end he decided against it and set off to the train station.

The memory of Dorothy faded as he traveled through Germany, and he enjoyed himself immensely. He stayed a week in a small village in the Black Forest, and while there wandered through the woods with freedom of mind. He watched an old clockmaker finish a cuckoo clock he had begun from scratch. He not only carved the wood but set the workings of the clock. He also made watches and little woodcarvings of black bears. They spoke about various topics, and Marcine bought the clock when it was finished.

In Berlin, he spoke to no one, except the many clerks, stewards and waiters one finds it hard to avoid on vacation. In such large cities, he rarely spoke to anyone. Actually, when he traveled, it was generally solitary; a lone man moving through the lives of others, observing. Paris had been the exception. And so the weeks passed. He walked through many museums, visited battlefields, ruins and landmarks. He walked along streets both empty and full and listened to bits of passing conversation. And he wondered where in all this he fit in.

It was the same back where he lived. Everyone else ran around busying themselves with the business of life, while he strolled along with empty time to kill. He read his books, took his walks and dreamed away his life. He had stepped away from the life that every good member of society lives, but he was alone in that place. He forewent the luxuries he might have had had he continued on the path he quit. His pile of money went generally untouched, and he lived meekly on the interest. And even then he felt guilty at times for not sharing his wealth. But if he did that, he would soon find himself having to work again. He did not want to arrive at that place. So perhaps he was selfish. Perhaps the reason no one quit the world is because without the world one has no one to share the daily life one lives. No one else could relate to his life. Oh, of course there were others, but they, like him, were in some corner of existence watching the world pass and to their eyes, when he passed he seemed just like everyone else, just as they seemed when they passed before his eyes.

But there were moments which attempted to draw him back into society. That is all Dorothy had been doing; acting like everyone else would in the situation. Yet he had run from it. Why? Because he felt nothing? That reason did not stop so many others from joining in union, even if for only a brief time. Yet he could not deceive her; although, had he not already to some extent? Had he broken her heart? He could not know. He wondered how it felt. Was it any worse than when he realized that Luann had gone? But he did not know her. It had not been love. Nor could have been Dorothy's affections for him. They were merely the building blocks upon which love might stand if circumstances had constructed the correct course in life. There was nothing grand about love; it might happen to anyone.

Marcine realized he wanted to go home. True, he had nothing more there than where he currently stood, but there were friends he had not seen in a long time. They probably wondered where he had gone. He had not really told anyone. It would be good to talk to someone who was not a stranger. Someone who would not ask the same questions as the previous person and pretend to listen to the answer.

Chapter Eleven

“You know,” said Marcine, “in all the time I lived in this building, I never ate in this restaurant.”

“Really?” His friend answered. They had just finished lunch in a diner on the first floor of Marcine’s old apartment building. He had been back from Europe for a little more than a week. “You didn’t eat out much then though.”

“That’s true.”

“Marcine?” A semi-familiar voice drew his attention. After a moment he recognized one of his old neighbors. “I thought I recognized you.”

Marcine introduced his acquaintance to his friend, and then his friend excused himself, paid his bill and headed back to work.

“I’ve got to get back to work too, but if you’ve got a minute, I’ve got something for you up in my apartment.” They left restaurant.

“What do you have?” Marcine asked when as they climbed the stairs.

“An address. A girl gave it to me just in case I ran into you. I don’t know why I kept it. I guess because she was pretty, and she seemed so distraught when she found out you were gone. It’s here somewhere.” He rummaged through coffee table drawers for a minute before retrieving a scrap of paper, glancing at and handing it to Marcine. “Luann; sound familiar?”

Marcine took the paper wordlessly and looked at it.

“Thank you.” He said in a distant voice and left the apartment. His neighbor said something, but he did not hear. When he was outside he walked to his car and sat in the driver’s seat staring at the address. It had been how long? Months. Would she still want him to come? He had to. It was not far, maybe an hour’s drive. He started the car and headed to the freeway.

It did not take long before he was nervous and thought to turn back. What would he say? The truth, of course. After reading her note, he had thought she was gone forever.

The drive, which seemed to take a long time, was over extremely quickly. He drove by the house twice to make sure he had the correct address before parking across the street. He opened his door, closed it and sat for a few

nervous minutes before laughing half convincingly at his nervousness. He left the car and turned towards the house. A deep breath, and then he walked across the street and up the steps. He raised his hand to knock but hesitated. Another deep breath, and then, noticing the doorbell, he rang. After a few moments he began to pace the porch. He did not hear any noise inside, and after a minute, he rang the doorbell again. He continued to pace, and then turned to leave.

As he reached the steps, he heard the door open behind him. He turned around and saw a teenage girl peeking from behind a half open. She looked a little like Luann.

“Can I help you?” She said in a wary voice.

“I was looking for Luann.” She closed the door a little when he spoke.

“What for?” The voice was distrustful.

“I,” Marcine realized he was not sure, “I need to speak with her.”

“She doesn’t live here anymore.”

Marcine turned half way around and sat on the steps. He looked at the girl but did not speak. He was trying to decide whether to ask for Luann’s new address, if she had one, when the girl spoke.

“Who are you, and what do you want with my sister?”

“My name’s Marcine, and; I don’t know; I just need to talk to her. She...”

“You’re Marcine?” The girl interrupted. She smiled and opened the door. “Why didn’t you say so? Come in. Come in.”

Marcine, somewhat bewildered, rose to his feet and walked to the door. Then, even more to his surprise, the girl clasped him in a hug.

“Thank you.” She said as she let go. “She told us about everything you did for her. Thank you for giving me my sister back.”

Chapter Twelve

“And this is Luann when she was three.” Roslyn laughed. “Isn’t she cute?”

Marcine nodded to the affirmative, and she flipped to the next page in the photo album. They were sitting at the dining room table, waiting for Roslyn’s mother to return home, as Roslyn would not give Marcine Luann’s address until he had met her parent’s. Roslyn stopped laughing.

“This was taken when we visited her at college.” It showed the two sisters sitting on a Luann’s bed in her dorm. “That was the last time I saw her until she came back.” She closed the album. “I couldn’t believe how thin she was; how old she looked. It must have been terrible for her. Is it true you found her sleeping on the street?” Marcine nodded. “I don’t think she told my parents

everything, but she told me if it hadn't been for you, she probably would be dead by now."

They were silent, and then the front door opened. Roslyn quickly wiped her eyes and ran to meet her mother. She returned leading her mother by the hand and introduced Marcine.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you. Luann must be so pleased. She said something about you leaving the country."

"I was in Europe for the past few months."

"That must have been fun. I hope Roslyn hasn't bothered you too much."

"Not at all."

"Is Luann here too?" She asked a little perplexed.

"She doesn't know." Roslyn answered smiling. "She left him this address, but he didn't get it until this afternoon. And he drove straight here when he did. Isn't it romantic?"

"Roslyn." Her mother said with a look of slight embarrassment. "And did you give him her address?"

"I was waiting until you came home so he could meet you. Besides, Luann won't be home from work for another hour. He's got plenty of time."

"Really. You are some trouble." She smiled. "I apologize Marcine, but it is true. She won't be home for at least an hour, maybe two. She goes to school in the mornings so she doesn't start work until noon. Anyway, here is her address, but if you're in no hurry, would you like to join us for dinner? John, Luann's father, will be home any time now, and I am sure he would like to meet you."

"I would be pleased to stay. This address is just down the street?"

"Five minutes, at the most. Roslyn, would you run down to the store and buy some milk?" She handed her daughter a five-dollar bill and waited until the teen left to continue. "Now, Marcine, while she is gone, I would like to thank you for what you did to help Luann, and also to ask you some questions." They seated themselves at the table. "Is it true she was sleeping on the street when you found her? I didn't want to mention it in front of Roslyn. I don't know how much she knows."

"Yes, it is true."

"And was she on drugs?"

"I think that is something you should ask her about."

"I have, but she won't answer. But she was changed when she came back. I just want to know what she's been through."

"If you want to know that, you will have to speak to her. From what I know, I can tell you this. Your daughter has suffered, more so than either of us can probably imagine. This suffering is in the past, and perhaps, it is best to leave it there."

"You're right. I know you are, but it's just hard to think of my daughter in that situation. I can't help but remember what she looked like when she came

home. I wept for days, from joy and terror.” A pause. A smile. “Is it true you only knew her for a few days?”

“Yes, less than a week.”

“And you haven’t seen her since?”

“Correct.”

“You will hardly recognize her. She looks like herself again.”

Chapter Thirteen

Marcine knocked on Luann’s door. There was no answer, even after the third attempt. His nerves eased a bit as he turned from the room. He turned back and knocked once more. A rustling of keys behind him. He turned.

Luann stopped as she rounded the hallway corner and looked up from her purse, from which she had just retrieved her keys. In her left arm she held a bag of groceries, and for a moment it felt like they were going to fall before she regained control and squeezed them tight. She did not move. Neither did he. At length he smiled.

“Hi.” Marcine said softly. She finally returned his smile. Her mom had been right, in one way. She looked different, alive, undoubtingly beautiful, but he would have recognized her at a glance, especially when she smiled. He felt like rushing to her and embracing her, but his feet would not move.

“Hi.” Luann answered just as softly, and for a time her feet were also solid, but after a few moments she walked forward, set her groceries on the ground and opened the door to her apartment. Then she turned, looked at Marcine and rushed into his arms. She buried her face in his chest as a few tears fell, and then they parted and she led the way into the apartment. He picked up the groceries and followed.

Inside, they seated themselves at the kitchen table and stared gently at one another. They smiled. They held hands, and at last they spoke.

“I thought you had gone forever.” Marcine said first.

“As I you.”

And they were silent again for a time.

At last they laughed.

“So tell me,” Luann asked, “where have you been?”

And so he told her of his travels, and she spoke of returning to her family, of work and school. Then they were again silent. And in that silence something changed, and when it was broken, they spoke their feelings.

Part Two; the Traveler

Chapter One

Marcine was envious of birds. He never said as much, but there was something in the way he followed their flight that made me think he wished to be so free. His eyes changed. They became light, joyous, yet a little sad when they looked back toward the ground. He looked as such as we stood on the balcony of my apartment. Seagulls drifted silently, for once, in the cloudy, windy sky. I could smell the sea, and from the safety of my vantage point, the Sound looked angry, rough. A lone sailboat struggled back to port. At the navy base sailors could be seen crawling over their ships. The fleet was due to leave the next morning. I wondered whether the storm, which seemed ready to rise, would keep the crowd from seeing them off. People never seemed as patriotic when it rained.

We went inside. I retrieved a bottle of wine and set it on the coffee table. Marcine smiled as we sat in the armchairs on either side of the table. I had not seen him for a year, and though he seemed no older, his face, which had always been calm, seemed wiser.

“So,” I said, “are you ready to tell me where you have been?” The subject had yet been breached in the hour since he turned up at my apartment. I remembered the last time I saw him; when I dropped him off to catch a flight to Mexico City. I received a message a week and a half later telling me that “something came up” and to not worry about picking him up. That was the last I heard from him, but there was nothing unusual about that. He was always changing his mind, flying off to odd corners of the world and falling in and out of love with strangers. That was simply Marcine.

“Mexico. Panama. Columbia. Chile.” He marked each nation by raising a finger. “Argentina. England. Hong Kong. Australia. New Zealand. India. Italy. I’m sure I forgot a few, but you get the idea.”

“Quite a three-week Mexican vacation.”

He laughed, and I realized how much I missed his company. It had always been that way with him though. He was simply not content living like the rest of us. Yet he was the kind of man stories were told about; the kind of man whom, in the right situation, becomes a hero or legend. At worst he is a ghost, passing through the world we all struggle with as if it did not affect him. For that I sometimes envied him.

“So tell me;” I said after a moment of silence, “you must have some stories. No one could pass a year like that and not have stories.”

“I have many.”

“Any in particular you wish to tell?”

“No, not really.”

“Then begin in Mexico, and if anything strikes your fancy, or mine, you can go into detail.”

“Sounds good, but first let’s order dinner. I haven’t eaten since breakfast.”

We ordered Chinese food from a small shop around the corner, and by the time we returned to our chairs, the deliveryman rang the intercom. We did not speak while we ate. I looked at Marcine, and he seemed distant, lost in a memory, I presume. I considered the list of countries he had rattled off. In the past year I had taken two weeks of vacation. One of those weeks I did not even go anywhere. The other I went skiing at a resort a mere three hours away. I wished sometimes I could simply drift like he did, but I did not have the money.

He sat back and sighed when he finished his meal. He looked content, as if at any moment, should he so choose, he could drift into a pleasant catnap. He looked good, youthful. At twenty-nine he could have passed for twenty-five, perhaps less. Although, looking in his eyes, I could have believed he was in his mid thirties. There was something almost ageless about him. He waited until I finished eating and then began to tell of his travels.

He spent three days in Mexico City, mostly poking around the Aztec ruins.

“It must have been an amazing place.” He said of Tenochtitlán. “It’s too bad the cultures here were killed off when the Europeans came. They seem to have figured a few things out that European thought will never deduce. Of course I’ve not read too much on it, but it seems they might have had a chance, even against the European weapons, if they had not been stricken by the influx of new diseases. It reminds me of *War of the Worlds*, except in reverse. Instead of the vast fleet of invaders being subdued by a new disease, a handful of invaders subdued entire civilizations, often without knowing it, by the germs and viruses they carried with them. All I know is that it is preposterous that the people living here before Europeans are called uncivilized, or even savage. I guess it falls in with the line of thought of thinking of people not as people, or of as lesser people. I will never fully comprehend how anyone thinks like that. We are all people. We all feel. We all live. We all have faults and good qualities. We may be different, but in no way should that justify beliefs of such superiority. But I suppose, no matter how little I understand such thoughts and feelings, they have existed and will continue to exist. It is just ridiculous, and sad, what people do to each other.”

Marcine has always been an idealist of sort. I think, though he fully accepts the way people actually are, he has never been able to ignore the feeling that the world, and human interaction, could be much better.

He left Mexico City in a rental car and drove towards the gulf. When he reached the coast, he drove leisurely north for a few days before stopping in a small town with only one hotel.

“A picturesque little place.” He called it. “I think normally it would have been quite relaxing, but as it was, the residents were bustling about in preparation for a hurricane. Already the wind was furious; the sky in turmoil. I

remember driving that day, watching the battered trees along the roadside and the gray, angry, waves in the gulf. I took a room and then helped nail boards over the windows.

“That was a long night, listening to the thunderous rains pound against the side of the hotel. The entire building shook, and the way the roof rattled, I expected at any moment for it to be blown off. But I fell asleep, at least for a few hours. When I awoke, it did not seem so severe, and I ventured to open the door and look at the sea. Dawn was yet come, but a faint light had arisen. To my surprise a yacht rolled on the waves just off shore. Then, as the waves turned, a small boat rose into view, struggling toward land. It did not seem to be making any progress. I walked to the ocean and in the glimpses took it all in. A man and woman rowed against the rough waves, but it seemed for every yard they made toward shore, they were sent back toward the boat nearly as far. It would have taken hours for them to make it, if they ever did. And the storm was drawing closer. I could see the churning thunderclouds to the east; lightning flashes intermixed with the black of thick clouds. It was surreal. Then I did perhaps the most foolish thing I have ever done.

“I dove within the waters and began to swim toward the boat. It was difficult to say the least, but the same turn of waves that kept them from shore brought me towards them. I do not know how long it took, but it seemed as if I was swimming for hours. The waves tossed me about effortlessly, but I kept swimming and was able to keep a relatively straight course.” Marcine paused for a moment. He seemed to be remembering that swim, attempting to put into words the struggle of a man fighting at every moment against the sea to retain his life. No matter what words he might have used, it would have been much less telling than the look on his face.

“It took, I think,” he continued, “three attempts to clamber into the boat when I reached it. I did not say anything as I took the oar from the woman. She sat in the back of the boat with a child I had not noticed from shore. She held the boy in one arm and tried to steer with the boat’s motor, which, obviously, had not worked. I glanced at the man beside me. He seemed exhausted, but it took all my strength to keep up with him. I stared at the approaching storm and rowed. I thought of nothing. My muscles ached; they burned with exhaustion. The wind grew stronger, and the rain, which had been a light mist, began to bombard us. Then, after a timeless age of stroke after stroke, the boat ground on the shore and soon I found myself clutching the woman to my side while we struggled against the wind toward the hotel. The man carried the small boy. It was hard to walk. I seriously believed, after all that, we might be blown away by the increasing wind. We paused at a group of palm trees. How they bowed, leaning over us first in one direction and then another. I remember exchanging a wordless look with the man. His face was full of relief. He nodded his head with sincere thanks and then, holding the boy to his bosom, began to crawl to the hotel. The woman and I followed, leaning

against each other as we crawled, occasionally stopping to withstand an exceptionally fierce gust of wind. Ahead of us the man had reached the restaurant of the hotel, and now stood in the open door way waving his arm with encouragement.

“When we made it through, I stood up and helped three other men close the door. We were almost not strong enough. Then I sat on the floor against the wall. The man and woman embraced and cried. The child had already fallen asleep. There were about a dozen people in the room, and they talked erratically. Then their voices became distant, and I too drifted into sleep.

“When I awoke, it was eerily quiet. I looked around the room and everyone was asleep, except the owner of the hotel, who sat behind the bar reading a book. When I walked up to him, he smiled and told me I had slept through the entire first half of the storm. I had been asleep for about twenty hours, and the town was now in the eye of the hurricane. He brought me some dinner, and as I ate, the wind began again to stir.

“The strength of the storm was incredible. When it finally petered out the next day, I ventured outside and looked at the damage. One of the cars outside the hotel had been flipped over and lay at least a hundred feet from where it had been parked. Trees lay on the ground; large trees which would have seemed immovable by any force but time or man.

“That was all the time I spent in Mexico. While waiting out the hurricane I had talked briefly with the man and woman from the yacht. It was too loud most of the time to really carry on a decent conversation, but he thanked me for my help and we talked a little of ordinary things. His name was Miguel, his wife’s Rosario and their son; I forget the son’s name. Anyway, they were returning to Colombia from Havana, and in the course of the following days, they invited me to join them. They even offered to pay the airfare back from Bogotá. I, obviously, accepted the offer. Amazingly their yacht was nearly unscathed from the hurricane. Honestly, they would have been safer aboard the boat. It definitely would have been safer for me, but then I never would have found myself, a few days after the storm, laying beneath the Caribbean sun, chatting with a beautiful Colombian woman. And she was beautiful too, and charming. We had a great time together.

“Miguel was pleasant as well. He never said where or how he had earned his wealth, nor did I consider it polite to ask, but he was loaded, and he spent freely. Their cupboards were filled with the most expensive foods. Their clothes were the finest. When we stopped at towns along the way, we always ate at the best restaurants. It was grand, and the best thing about it was that money was never mentioned. He was truly wealthy; enough that he did not care if anyone knew he had money or not. You know what I mean. People who are not comfortable with their wealth try to show it off. When they order a hundred dollar bottle of wine, they make sure everyone knows how much it costs them. They are the kind of people that pay exorbitant amounts of money for art just so

they can tell people how much they paid, irregardless of whether they like the piece of art or not. Miguel was not like that. Later, when I spent a week in his house, the paintings all had a similar feel to them. Some were different styles, but looking at them, I could tell they had all been picked by people who chose what they liked, not what was expensive or considered the thing to have.

“He was also a well educated. They both were for that fact. I think I may have enjoyed most the nights we spent at sea. After anchoring, the three of us would often sit up almost until dawn conversing about a wide spectrum of ideas. I have never witnessed stars so beautiful as those nights, even in the travels I took afterwards. I think because all three of us were so at ease. They were good people.

“I can still here him talking about the chaos of life for most people in Colombia. I admit, it seemed a little hypocritical for him, sitting where he was, to discourse on the injustices people had to deal with, but if nothing else, I believe his humanity was in earnest.

“I was with them about three and a half weeks, down the Mexican coast, through the Panama Canal and finally to Buenaventura, the port town in Colombia where they lived. Like I said, I spent a week with them there before taking leave, and that seems a nice place to take a break. You seem to be drifting.”

It was true. I normally would have been in bed long before, and the wine had begun to take hold. “I’m not used to being up this late.” I told him honestly. “And I do have to work tomorrow.”

“Well then, shall we continue tomorrow, or do you have plans?”

“Nothing binding.” I yawned. “And tomorrow’s Friday, so we can talk all night if it takes that long, considering you’ve covered what, a month?”

He smiled and jumped to his feet. I began to get up but let myself fall back in the chair.

“Don’t worry, I’ll show myself out.” He said, and then he was gone.

Left alone, my eyelids grew heavy, and soon I was in the realm of half sleep, images of hurricanes and Latino women streaming through my dreams. Then the faint sound of a radio, the realization of daylight, and my eyes sprang open. It was morning, and the alarm had already been playing for half an hour.

Chapter Two

“Let’s see, where did we leave off?” said Marcine. We again were seated in my living room, having only a few minutes earlier returned from dinner at a nearby restaurant. He let a puff of smoke into the air. I did likewise. Neither of

us smoked, but he had managed to bring some Cubans into the country, and it seemed right after a fulfilling meal to sit with a glass of brandy and a fine cigar.

“Colombia.” I answered.

“Oh, yes;” he replied, “taking leave of Miguel and Rosario. Correct?”

I nodded and coughed. Even a good cigar fills the lungs with smoke. It is such a foolish thing. Although, there was a good feeling after awhile.

“Somewhere it came up,” he continued after I stopped coughing, “that I had always thought it would be exciting to travel through South America by horseback, and as a last gesture of thanks, Miguel gave me one of his horses, as well as a stack of different currencies totaling about ten thousand dollars.

“He had some exquisite horses; thoroughbreds; an Arabian; even an appaloosa. They were beautiful creatures. We spent one afternoon at his stables. What I remember most of that day is when they let the horses into a field so they could exercise. Such power. Such grace. There was a freedom in watching them run. It made me feel good to be alive. Why? Simply because they seemed to enjoy life.”

His eyes had the same sparkle as when he gazed upon birds in flight. I wondered if my face ever shone so bright.

“My own horse,” he continued, “was not as fine as those I saw that day, but he was gentle and kind. His name was Pancho. He was a bit of a mutt, but the two of us got along well.

“And it was great traveling that way. It is peaceful, natural. I headed south, winding my way along dirty jungle roads and narrow mountain paths. So many memories rise just at the edge of my mind. Monkeys screeching in the trees, clambering about the many branches, cackling with laughter. Colorful birds and flowers which shrouded nature in a hue I had never before seen. Small villages in which but a few people spoke Spanish. Waterfalls descending from the clouds, as if, though I knew so much better, they fell from a river in heaven. Snakes, so hideous yet beautiful, wrapped around tree branches and slithering deftly amongst the weeds. Laying beneath the stars in a field of chest high grass, listening to the breathing of my horse and the congregation of strange, wild, sounds. Considering that each of these sounds was life; that each creature, no matter how repugnant or beautiful, had at least that thing in common with me. A jaguar streaking through the bushes, almost silent; beautiful. I stopped to look at a paw print on a muddy road. It dwarfed my hand.

“I went fishing with some locals on a little lake in the mountains. I don’t even know what country we were in. They still used reed canoes and small nets, catching each day little more than they used that day. I sat up late at night around a fire talking with them. We spoke of fishing. We told stories. I can’t remember much of what was said, but there was a simple camaraderie with them.” Marcine paused while I retrieved the brandy bottle from the kitchen counter. “I think the village was about sixty people. It was a community in a sense I had never felt before; something so entirely different from the civilized

world. I guess it was more pure. They had no grand set of laws. There was no bureaucracy. No unnecessary waste. Their only business was life. Did they care that they had no automobiles, televisions or newspapers? Of course not.

“Only a couple of the younger men spoke Spanish, and at that not very well. My Spanish, though it had improved vastly, was also a little shaky. Still, I spent a week with those people, sharing both work and play, food and laughter. It was great. That entire time was great, wandering through the vast, wild land. No one bothered me. I did not get sick. The animals left me alone. I had only myself, Pancho and the various strangers to cross my path.

“Eventually I wound my way into Chile. It was probably about two and a half months after I left Buenaventura that I returned to the Pacific Ocean. I do not know how far south I was, but imagine my great delight when I crested a path and it revealed not only the ocean but a rocky beach filled with penguins.

“I spent a day and a half there just watching them go about their daily lives. It was amazing. They are such simple creatures, yet there was a pleasantness in their interaction. They were amusing too, just standing about squawking. And one of the most amusing scenes I have ever seen was when Pancho walked out a ways toward them, nibbling at little shoots of grass growing between the rocks, and he was surrounded by a group of penguins. I took a couple pictures of it. Hopefully they turn out.

“Anyway, after I left the penguins, I headed inland in a southerly direction. I think it was the next day that I met Tomás. I owe much to this man, as you shall see. He came to Chile from Spain about fifty years ago and has spent every day since tending a small flock of sheep some fifteen or twenty miles from the nearest village. And though he was well into his seventies, he was a vigorous man. Not once in the months I was with him did I see him rest from weariness. He made his own clothing and lived primarily on cheese, milk and potatoes from his own garden. He also maintained a small patch of corn, as well as a grove of about twenty fruit trees. He was entirely self-reliant.

“He had lived in solitude for the past eight years; since his wife had passed away. He did not speak oft of her, but it was obvious that he still missed her and shall for the remainder of his life. By what he told me, they used to share every moment together, and I got the impression that he had been happy his entire life until she passed. Even after his loss, at least when I knew him, he seemed to enjoy life, but there was, he admitted, too much time in the day now that she was gone.

“I spent two and a half months with him. The first few weeks I accompanied him in his daily routine. We did not speak a great deal, but I felt comfortable with him, as if, had there been anything important, no matter what the subject, we could have spoken of it. Such a feeling I have felt with no one else. There are certain things I do not speak of to anyone, my deepest dreams and thoughts on life and love, yet had he asked to hear them, I would have spoken with joy. I'm not entirely sure why, but I think because he was free.”

Marcine stubbed the butt of his cigar in the bowl we were using as an ashtray. My cigar, only half gone, smoldered beside it. He adjusted himself in his chair.

“After I had been with him a few weeks, it rained heavily while we were out with the flock. Returning to Tomás’ house we had to cross a stream that had been engulfed by the downpour. The adult sheep had no problem fording the water, but a lamb lost its footing and was swept away. I happened to be a little downstream, watching the animals cross. Jumping into water, it was only up to my waist, I was able to corral the bleating kid, but in doing so I lost my footing. After maybe fifty yards I was able to regain my feet and carry the shivering animal ashore. I had been crashed a few times on some rocks, but it was nothing serious. The bruises would heal in a couple of weeks. I had also swallowed quite a bit of water. This would not pass so harmlessly.

“We returned to the house, and I dried out by the fire while Tomás made dinner. I shivered a little, but when I was dry, I felt fine. We ate, talked a little and then went to bed. I do not remember the next month. According to Tomás I spent that time in a delirious fever, thrashing about in bed, talking sporadically. I have vague remembrance of my body being extraordinarily weak and sickly. I remember, when the fever finally broke, awakening to find Tomás at my side, staring at me with a mild compassion in his eyes. I remember him saying good morning as if it had been but the night before that I had lain down to sleep. I was so weak. My mouth tasted of disease. It was such a terrible feeling lying there helpless, unable to lift even my arm. Tomás fed me, as he had been doing throughout the sickness. For days I did nothing but sleep and eat. Every time I woke up Tomás was there, beside the bed. I asked about his flock. He shrugged it off and told me to sleep. I never did find out how he managed it, but the sheep were all healthy when I was finally well enough to go outside.

“It was about seven weeks from the day I fell in the stream until I was able to leave bed. I do not know what it was either. Tomás said he regularly drank from that stream and had never gotten sick. It may have been some rogue virus or bacteria. Or I may have been bitten by a mosquito and contracted malaria; falling in the river merely a coincidence. Irregardless, it was probably the worst experience of my life. I never want to feel so empty again. It was terrible. And that is what I remember. I guess it is good I cannot remember the worst of it, but there is part of me that wants to know how greatly I suffered. I guess it is this; it is an experience I would have never desired, but that I have had it, I wish I had the memory of it. I think it is there though, inside. I have had some terrible dreams since then.”

Marcine rose from his chair and walked to the bathroom. While he was gone I started a fire in the gas fireplace and dimmed the overhead light. It gave the room a cozy, welcoming, feeling. Too few were the nights I lit the room as such and relaxed with a novel and a cup of tea. My life was simply too busy to relax very often. I also watched too much television, sitting sometimes for

hours, changing channels at random. I suppose that is relaxing in a way, but does not have the calming effect of a quiet evening conversing with a friend or reading a good book before a fireplace or the open vista of nature, as seen from the balcony. Sometimes I get so caught up in the every day acts of living, I forget to pause and enjoy the simplest pleasures of this life.

Chapter Three

“Tomás once told me,” Marcine continued, “that this life is like a maze in which we all begin and end at different points. Yet many roads intersect or join, sometimes for but a moment, sometimes for almost an entire lifetime. He and his wife traveled the same path for many years, but while she reached the end of her journey, his continued. Such as my path joined with his for a time and then parted. ‘There is no grief,’ he told me, ‘as we reach this intersection for we have journeyed together in genuine amiability. I say only this to you my friend; keep to your path. Be leery of those that would draw you down their own for, though you may find joy for some time, you will at the end reach a juncture when you realize you have become lost. And then what shall you do? In this maze of life one cannot retrace his steps but instead must wander aimlessly in hopes that he might once again find himself on the road he was meant to travel down.’

“When at last I walked away from him, I simply said, ‘Thank you.’ In reply he wished me a safe journey, and I turned my back from his simple life and continued south. I left Pancho there. He seemed happy roaming about the fields with the sheep, and Tomás agreed to keep an eye on him. At the next village, after waiting a few days, I caught a ride to a small town, where I caught a bus to Punta Arenas, a city at the southern end of Chile. It was a relaxed town, although after the previous months everyone seemed to be rushing frantically about. I put up at a small hotel overlooking the Strait of Magellan and lost myself in thoughts of times past when ships passed through those waters as the only means to reach the Pacific coast of the Americas. There were a few ships in port, but nothing compared to what it would be like if the Panama Canal did not exist. Between that and the Suez canal, it is amazing to consider how drastically the shipping lanes have been changed.

“After about a week I decided it was time to head home. It had been about five months since you dropped me off at the airport, and honestly, I was tired of speaking Spanish. I had become used to it, but it was still something I had to think about. I guess I missed being able to converse naturally, without having to remember or translate words in my brain. Oh, sure, I was fine with the daily interactions; shopping, checking into a hotel or a friendly chat about the weather

with a stranger; but I could only express myself to a certain point. Even then, when I had been speaking Spanish exclusively for five months, I could not have sat with someone and spoken such as I have with you these last few days. I wish I could. I truly wish I could go anywhere in the world and converse with anyone with ease and understanding. It is a pointless desire, I know, but I cannot help imagining how grand it would be, at least in one way, to always be on equal footing with people.”

Marcine leaned toward the fire and was silent.

“Seven months.” I said.

“What?” He looked up.

“Seven months;” I reiterated, “You still have seven months to cover.”

“Yes, yes.” He answered with a smile. “How easy it is to say, but I was just considering how long ago it seems that I left Chile. Change is odd that way. It draws out time. The years I have spent in one place; they pass quickly, and the memories, while pleasant, fade leisurely into the past. These memories, this past year, will also fade, but they have taken more time to record, from my perception, than those other years, and as such, shall remain more vivid. I doubt I shall ever forget Rosario, Miguel, Tomás, nor those Incan villagers whose names I never could properly pronounce. Yes, the memories will deteriorate a little, I will forget their names, but when I am old, laying down on my deathbed, they, and all the other faces that have crossed my path in more than a passing exchange, shall be with me. I doubt I shall ever forget the sound of a penguin’s squawk as he walks freely along the beach, or the smell of tropical flowers as the evening wind stirs their humid fragrance. I close my eyes, and I can see a rocky path I traveled down somewhere in the Andes; I can feel Pancho’s breath as he walks behind me. Snow capped mountain peaks and lush valleys of fruit trees and monkeys. Desert plains. Ocean shores. The smell of the sea from a dozen different ports, all similar, yet each unique. The familiar sight of a friend at a journey’s end.” He tipped his brandy glass in my direction. “All these things form me, create me one moment at a time. And though I know it is something that is rarely said, I say it now: I love life. I love every up and down, every face and passing thought; the grand construction of this earth, from the smallest grain of sand to the largest cloud spread mountain-like in the sky. The world is beautiful. Life is beautiful. Oh how I wish that people would take the time to see it; to feel it. In everything there is wonder. I hold this glass in my hand and swirl about the brandy. How majestically the reflection of the flames churns before my eyes. I look upon your smiling face and am filled with joy that you, my friend, are happy. What is there more grand than this? Feeling, the true perception of feeling, is paramount for in it is everything beautiful, wondrous. That I could share the joy in my heart for this existence; to be able to impart the blessed peace within my soul so that you might know what I feel and tell me whether it is equivalent to anything you have before known. Oh, that I could clasp the world to my bosom and spread my happiness through its veins.”

It is hard to describe the feelings I felt listening to Marcine speak. Part of me was taken up by his joy; his sparkling eyes which shone with the reflection of the flames, as well as with another, inner, light. Yet how could I not be envious of him? Irregardless of what he felt, the fact that he could say such words with such glowing sincerity; how my heart ached that I could do the same.

Chapter Four

We sat in silence for some time, gazing at the fire, absorbing the warmth that had risen between us. I would like to say I thought great thoughts or was changed in some profound way, but the truth is, I did not think; I cherished the calm that had taken hold of me and found myself overwhelmed by an affinity for all things. Thinking back on it, I believe I was so taken up by his words and the peaceful glow of his countenance, I could not help but feel remarkably pleasant.

“In a tavern,” Marcine broke the silence after what seemed the appropriate interlude, “I overheard a couple of English sailors talking. It seems their cook had taken ill and could not complete the trip back to England. As neither of them looked forward to cooking for themselves or eating cold food, I volunteered my services in exchange for passage. They readily accepted and the next day introduced both myself and the idea to their captain.

“He was all I ever imagined a British captain to be; quiet, astute and filled with a seemingly endless knowledge of seafaring. It seemed almost a shame he commanded a giant metal cargo ship instead of a wooden galleon. He was skeptical of the idea at first, but after we had talked awhile, he agreed and I made myself home in a tiny cabin at the back of the galley.

“Honestly, there is not too much to tell. I was up early every morning to cook breakfast. I kept the galley clean, fixed the meals and made sure there was food handy for the night crew. It’s not like you read about in books, in centuries past. While the quarters were cramped, they were not unbearable. The crew was small. I worked, but the hours were not terrible. Actually, I saw little of anyone, except at meal times, which was fine by me. I think I enjoyed most the early morning hours, looking out upon the black ocean and then up at the stars. They seemed so large, bright. It was peaceful, but almost unbearably empty. It must be absolutely terrible to be stranded at sea, alone, with that same endless black stretching out in every direction. I guess it makes one appreciate the land for there, no matter what, you have always your feet to carry you, and if you become tired, you may lay down to rest. But in the sea; you cannot rest lest you sink down and die. There is hopelessness in the sea. Even on that giant ship, I

felt it. We were but a handful of men, days from any shore, pushing into the black night where sometimes it was impossible to tell where the sea was at an end and the sky began. How fragile this life seemed; how inconsequential humanity appeared in that light for we, as a whole, are likewise bound upon this earth while it rides endlessly along the empty waves of space.

“In England, the captain asked me if I wanted to stay on board for a while, perhaps just for one more cruise, or maybe for a few. I only last week disembarked the ship in San Francisco. In the months between, we circled the entire globe transporting various goods from one port to another. But of adventures or things I can tell, there are few. Yes, I now know the smell of the streets in Hong Kong while straggling about half blind with drunkenness in the wee hours of the morning, but this is an intangible thing which one can know only by experience. I have seen the sun rise off the coast of China and watched it set in Spain. There are so many faces that have passed by, so many fleeting conversations and fading looks. For it all, I understand the world better. I understand, a little, what it is like to be a butcher in Calcutta or a waiter in Tel Aviv. I have walked the streets in many towns in which the signs were foreign, the words a blur of incomprehensible sounds. But of this, I have learned one thing be true; we are all people. Anywhere you go in this world you will find people that smile, people that frown, are happy, sad and every possible mood or feeling between. Everywhere there are men and women. Everywhere they interact with differing results and ease. Yes, cultures form us differently, plague our minds with prejudices and stereotypes, but at the end, we all hold a common bond. This thought is not grand, it has been said before, but I now feel its truth. I think it struck home when I was at a restaurant in Florence and at the table next to me a family sat eating dinner. They laughed and joked the same as any family might in any city in any century, whether at home or on vacation. They were people being people. And then I remember the youngest child of that family, a girl, looking at me and smiling shyly before turning back to her meal. She looked back again a few minutes later and I smiled back. She laughed shortly and turned to her dinner. A few more times we exchanged such simple looks, and then as I rose to leave, she turned one last time and waved goodbye. I returned in kind and left with the feeling that no matter what I do or where I go in life, I have a bond with people; we all are human; we all feel.”

Marcine looked at me once more with a warm twinkle in his eye and then rose from his chair. He placed his hand warmly on my shoulder as he passed my chair on his way to the door.

“I’ll see you around.” He said, and then he was gone. I saw him a few more times, and then he was off again, out searching for whatever he seeks in life. I have never been able to figure out exactly what that is, or whether he will ever find it, but I have the odd feeling that it is something simple; something the rest of us most often overlook.

Part Three; the Interloper

Prologue

I

The cannonball slid firmly into place. It was frightened, alone. Its fear, however, was yet newly dawned when it burst from the artillery and was afloat in the magnificent emptiness of the sky. How free it soared; king above the world; rising, rising, dropping rapidly toward a grand collision with the earth; freedom gone; existence dissipated in a tremendous discharge of power and ghastly beauty. Outward spread fire and fragment through air concussed, splinters of house, torso of dog, porchlight, table, window, house interior; gone, disassembled in the chaotic aftermath of the lone cannonball's glorious death. A hundred others followed after, ravaging the town, but death could find no victory, save the lone dog without a master, gnawing on a stolen turkey bone; life had already vacated this place and taken with it all that was valuable so, as the lines of soldiers filtered cautiously amongst the ruins, they found nothing to sustain them, save the few structures unharmed in the bombardment, and who among them would dine at those tables except the elite minds that began not only this needless attack but the revolution? These soldiers with feet blistered, foraging in the ruins for scraps of food and cloth, making fires from the scattered remains of homes and palaces; they shall not benefit this chill night from the warm fireplaces and quilted blankets where the generals sleep. They shall shiver, suffer, moan and attempt to weep, desiring tears of wine so that they might drink and sleep and dream of a better life, or even of life as it was before; they shall bear unreasonable burdens, walk improbable paths, accept death, endure foolishness, and then they shall say, "No more." No more shall we be slaves and march at the behest of a few undesirable men for the name of any nation. No more will we strangle ourselves so that they may consider the war well fought, well played and strategized. No more shall we take up weapons against men with whom we hold more in common than those that order us to take up these arms. No more will we starve while others are full and feed scraps to their pets and servants. We are free men now, each of us; all of us.

II

Marcine turned in his bed; vague thoughts, feelings, streaming through his mind, narrowly out of reach of consciousness. An idea was forming, but he wondered whether it would ever reach forth from his soul and grace the scattered papers of his room. Amongst the shadows of the early morn, the meager furnishings of the apartment spun before his half awakened eyes; a small

desk, cracked, old, covered with papers; poems, ideas, thoughts, grocery lists; all absentmindedly placed together in an order his mind no longer can recall; a table, beside the desk, likewise hidden by papers save one small area cleared for eating; an empty plate and wine glass; one chair; a lamp; the bed; that is all. It was all the same; all clouded, plain. Then his thoughts were vivid for an instant; then gone and in their remembrance he could not recall their sweet eloquence or deep meaning. He used to be able to interpret his soul. He used to be able to. He sat up in bed and looked around his small, dark, room. He had to get out. He needed to observe life.

It was life that inspired him; his muse. To see the geese flying overhead, silhouetted against the rising sun, a river below, void of man, rushing, rushing to the distant sea. The laughter of fools and children. The yipping of dogs; dreams of these creatures unchained, playing unrestrained; hope. The craters on the moon, golden, reflective of emptiness. An oak tree, alone, rising triumphant against time. Life; how wonderful the spirit of existence, flowing throughout everything, unbroken and everlasting. A wisp of dandelion floating on the wind; dipping up, down, against a wall, catching in a woman's hair, black, wavy, flowing as she briskly trots along a sequestered path, passing silently; wordless looks, thoughts unbound; poetry. Her eyes, blue, radiant with life, perpetual joy; imagined moments of innocent laughter and deep conversation. Marcine's heart swells with memories, dreams and futures countless as the thoughts within. He is free again. The world once more emits a bright glow of hope. He grasps between his fingers an acorn overlooked by the squirrel whom has built his hold in the tree he rests against. It rolls from fingertip to fingertip, rough, now smooth, and then he cracks it open and eats the fruit. This meal, though meager, shall feed his soul much longer than shall any feast. The sun upon his shoulders, as if he was a flower, imbibes his body with the surging power of life.

Marcine returns to his compartment and flings wide the window. The papers are swept by the breeze from the desk and table, and as he gathers them in, he remembers their forgotten order and feverishly begins to craft the masterpiece he has always believed he could write.

There was a whisper. Marcine opened his eyes and listened. There was perfection in its tone. His soul leapt; he felt life. He was floating, bathed by grace, without perception of the commonplace. He was warm, as if held in the bosom of heaven. The whisper spoke, and he transcribed; its voice was inspiration; his muse. Great words he wrote, pages in a breath, and then; thunder; fire; hate; mankind was at hand. The warmth was gone; the whisper drowned in the overwhelming noise of a mob outside. Distraught, he glared through his window. There was a crowd in the street, screaming, advancing towards the capital.

III

There was a gentle rustling at the rear of the cell, and then the door opened. Inquisitive, the inmate walked slowly to the opening and peaked out, glancing first to the left and then to the right. No one. He stepped into the hall. At the end another door was opened, revealing light. Vaguely he remembered being led through that door to his cage. In a bound he was outside. No one was in sight. He breathed in deeply and began to run, wanting to put as much distance between himself and his prison as he possibly could. At length he came to the front gate. It was open, and he walked into the street. There was a woman across the road, running. She saw him, screamed and ran faster. In the direction she ran from were great noises. Frightened by these, he ran after her. She looked back and saw him, screamed again and shut herself inside a shop. No one else was around. He kept running. It felt good to stretch his legs.

The Lion, the prisoner, after all, was a lion, ran tirelessly from the people that had long gawked at him and tempted him with sweet smells beyond the fence. He was unused, however, to people running from him. He had never before met terror, nor did he realize he was the cause of it. But he chose his path well and found himself in deserted streets, the only reminder of men the distant din from whence he came; that which the woman had been running from. He slowed his gait and observed the world around him. The buildings were new to him, but then so was everything; he did not remember ever being anywhere but inside the cage. He was now free, but what was freedom?

IV

Two years had the revolt, or civil war, carried itself upon the land before the soldiers stopped fighting and returned home. It was an unusual situation; no one had won. The previous government could by no means claim power, nor could the rebels, but oddly no one seemed to care at first. Commerce continued; in fact it picked up as the men returned and filled some their old jobs, others those new. Bartering quickly increased. People who could not find jobs in the cities began to move to the country. Some factories closed, especially those making supplies for the opposing war efforts. Most local governments continued to function, while most of the national laws went unheeded. Things were changing at an incredible rate.

Of course a few scattered battles embroiled; some people had been soldiers too long to put down their arms. Actually, few people did put down their arms; instead they took them home. A few bands of now armyless soldiers formed gangs and attempted to terrorize villages and towns for profit. But the towns were all armed and drove them away. No one wanted to fight a war, but assuredly they would defend their homes. Thus chaos, which many observers,

foreign and domestic alike, predicted, did not happen. It seemed a regression almost to the old days when the land was a loose union of city-states without a central government. And oddly, it worked. Everyone just minded their own areas. The roads were kept by the cities. The national bank continued to make money independently of the national government. The currency dropped some internationally, but not a great deal. The factories still produced goods. The ports were still open. Life continued as it had. Customs clerks went to work and still were paid. Tourism resumed after the two years of war. And so it continued for a little less than three months. Then the politicians began to clamor that a federal government was needed. They began to campaign and push for elections. They began to work on the people's minds, and the people were too used to them being there to realize the nation was running itself quite well without them.

Chapter One

"There is no God." Said the Atheist.

"By what proof?" Asked Marcine.

"By the fossil record, by evolution, by logic."

"By logic? What strange logic must it be that by accepting one thing as true another, which the first does not preclude, is dismissed as false. Even if evolution is true, this does not in any way disprove God. Even if there are skeletons of human type a million years old, this does not disprove that God created Adam. It is as saying that this piece of fruit is an orange, therefore there is no such thing as an apple. Even you must admit the folly in that logic."

"Yes. I have never considered as such. But this does not change my belief that there is no God."

"Now you speak more accurately. You believe. You have no proof, just as the man of God, of any God, has no proof that the deity he believes in is true. Your atheism is merely a religion such as theirs. You have your fossils and theories by which you construct your belief, the same as they have their histories and religious texts to construct theirs."

"But science has proven false so much of what religion believes."

"This is true, but the possibility exists that God will prove false much of what science believes."

"Science is fact. It cannot be changed."

"How long have you lived?"

"What? Thirty-three."

"In that time, how much of it have you watched carbon decompose?"

“None.”

“Yet you accept that it deteriorates at a set pace and thus are determined the age of fossils?”

“Yes.”

“Now, forgive my ignorance of the scientific proof, but has anyone watched a piece of carbon decompose for, say, a hundred years?”

“Of course not, but it holds at a regular rate.”

“Yes, yes, mathematically it should, of course, but suppose it does not? Suppose its half lives hold to the theory for a thousand years, and then suddenly the rate triples, quadruples or slows to a quarter the pace.”

“That would not happen.”

“Probably not, but the possibility exists. Science is derived from observation and carefully structured conclusions. Gravity, for example, has been observed and calculated for this earth. It has also been calculated for other planets based on the small information observable on earth. But until a man stands on that distant planet, drops a rock and observes its rate of fall, those formulas will not be fully proven. The same as the center of the earth; science has given its theory as to the material of the core based on its many ingenious formulas and machines, but until a sample is taken from that unreachable place, it cannot be known for certain what exists there. There may be elements that do not exist on the surface of the earth that abide within. This other planet, which they state so confidently exists with an iron core; it might well be something different that to their machines gives the properties of iron. All these things are not truths. They are conjectures, well based, yes, on the principles established here on earth, but conjectures nonetheless. This universe contains things mankind has yet to witness. It holds secrets we shall never understand. For all that he believes he knows, man knows little of the Truth. It has been proven endlessly amongst ourselves. As you stated, science disproves constantly the errors of the past. Why then are they so confident that their own summations will not also fall? They who believe they reveal truth become blinded by their own revelations and fail to seek further the observations of life. Do you think Darwin will always be taught in schoolbooks as fact? It was not that many centuries past that children were taught the sun revolved the earth and that the world was flat.”

Chapter Two

Marcine paused at the door. He hated it when he was nervous, and his heart now was twitching uncontrollably. A bead of sweat ran down his side from his underarm. He turned around, took a step away and then paused again. He had to. It was good; it was the best thing he had ever written.

It happened every time he took a new work to his publisher. The man had bought every poem he had ever taken him, but this was different. This was philosophy, or something of that kind; he was not really sure.

"I need to edit it more," he thought and took another step from the door, "but no, I must." He turned back and entered the office. The secretary recognized him and smiled.

"Why hello," she spoke merrily, "it has been quite awhile, hasn't it? Do you have something new?"

"Yes." He stammered. He could barely look at her, which he knew was foolish. Why was he so nervous?

"I can't wait to read it. I love your poems."

"Thank you."

The publisher called him into his office.

"Something new?" The man asked, pulling out his reading glasses in expectation. "It has been some time. How have you been?"

"Fine. Fine." He paused, breathed shortly. "It's not poetry."

"Well, what is it then?"

"Well... here, just read it." He handed the manuscript to the older man who sat back in his chair and put his eyeglasses on.

"The Human Being; the Foundation of Humanity." He read out loud. "Philosophy?" Marcine made a noncommittal gesture. "Something different, eh? I guess I can read it, but I can't promise anything. This is kind of out of my area."

"I know," he was little more relaxed now the paper was out of his hand, "but I have always come to you. It was only fair to come to you."

"Quite right. Now, let me see." The publisher leaned over his desk to read. Marcine excused himself and headed to the restroom. The publisher looked up and watched him go before turning to the pages on his desk.

Part One: The Societal Body

What is the perfect society? Is it not one in which all are equal in as much as they are given full opportunity to reach the apex of their potential? And if every individual can maximize their natural inclinations in such ways to benefit not only themselves but the community of man, there is little left in the way of progress but eradicating the crimes by which mankind harms itself for, indeed, many a man's greatness is in his brutality. Not until every individual maintains

the self-restraint it takes to live without harm to another individual shall society achieve greatness. Only when no one dreams of being a thief, soldier, policeman, lawyer or advertiser shall mankind live in unison. This will happen only when the only occupational title ever used is that of human being.

‘Class has been a stepping stone, and while superiority of mind and strength in varying individuals shall never be erased, nor should it be desired, the opportunity must be given for all human beings to develop such gifts so as to utilize them to the utmost for the betterment of mankind and human society. This cannot be done unless each individual believes without doubt that no one is superior. No position in the world community should be considered of more worth than any other. People merely have different capabilities, and in these they must be successful, but this success must not become a goal or contest. To do well what one is capable of for the betterment of everyone must become a trait inbred into each member of society.

‘At current, few people do as they are capable of, most because they have never discovered what truly they might undertake, while nearly all because of the inefficiency by which the world runs, as well as the irrelevance of much of what society produces and holds dear. It is an absolute waste of human potential to send droves to work in any of the businesses which revolve around the marketing, advertising, patenting and trade marking of products and services. As with class, such corporate ownership of technology and advances which can benefit all peoples is obsolete. It has served its purpose, as did the industrial revolution and the Renaissance. As society progresses, the individual greed which exists with such preponderance must be replaced with a goal of common human greatness. Business, as it now stands, while it will continue to push technology forward, will continue to widen the gap between the wealthy and poor, as well as continuing to teach each successive generation that greed and deceit are above reproach and that to prey on others for one’s own benefit is not only okay but expected.

‘A reeducation of humanity is needed. Firstly, it must be instilled in the young minds yet to come that they are human beings, never a job title. Secondly, technology which might benefit humanity must be used to that extent rather than to increase the profit of any company. For example, if a new engine was created that ran noiselessly and achieved two hundred miles to the gallon of gasoline, this technology should be given to all automakers so that they might also install it in their automobiles. And when a second maker discovers how to make the engine achieve two hundred and fifty miles to the gallon, they as well should share this with their fellow automakers. But as it is, a company that created this engine would patent it and either sell the product for an outrageously high price or bury it for a bribe from an oil company. Capitalism has driven science and technology far, but imagine how far it might have been driven by now if technology was shared so that the lives of all might be bettered rather than the lives of a few. Humanity must shed the burden it casts upon

itself by holding secrets. Only by exposing all knowledge can the human beings which create society increase within themselves and in turn push forward the future generations toward the goal of perfection.

‘Consider humanity as a human body. As it now stands, each organ, each limb, holds itself as a sovereign entity. The fingers; how often have they fought with the hand and struck out across the empty space at the similar appendage across from them? The liver and the heart at times are friends, while at other times they refuse to cooperate and embargo each other. The brain considers the feet savages, degenerates and refuses to speak with them. The feet consider the brain arrogant and attempt to destroy it by terrorism. In the throat, where the flu has been unleashed, a cell contains the knowledge to defeat the illness, but it can produce only a small amount, which it sells at high profit to the few others whom can afford it. The remainder of the cells, those whom cannot purchase the precious formula, are sickly and dying. The gall bladder, which produces this formula in mass amounts, enough for all its cells, would help the throat cells, if only it was not at war with the throat. The left lung as well has the ability to cure the throat, but its goods have been forbidden. In the right lung, there is turmoil. The lower half contests the upper half’s right to govern it. In an elbow the young cells go untaught because their elders feel themselves under compensated for teaching them. In the knee chaos reigns; a dozen factions have sprung up and are murdering themselves. The body is in disarray, yet the organs, muscles and bones operate in ignorance of the whole. The heart beats still strong, yet it does not realize that if the brain dies, as well does it. It does not know that its own existence is dependent upon the strength of the lungs. Yet all are connected, within all flows the same blood, that life passed through each successive generation, that nature which binds all together as a whole.

‘Consider now the body in which there are no factions, in which each cell is celebrated as an individual and considers itself in no manner but as part of the glorious body. The flu again has come to the throat, for no matter how efficient, grand, the body becomes, it cannot prevent the occasional unexpected storm. But this time, it is eradicated for a thousand cells have been given the knowledge to produce the medicine, and they forthwith deliver their entire stock to the needy. And when they run out, the lines continue to turn for the entire body has shipped its sentinels to the benefit of those in danger. The danger averted, the body moves on, every cell in its own place, performing to its utmost a task enjoyable and useful. And how these cells move, off on the bloodstream; one day in the heart, another in the foot, and yet a third in the brain. They move everywhere unrestricted and produce at every place as if it were their home.

‘There is little doubt that humanity might be great, but first it must shear from itself all that is adverse to its greatness. Everything that benefits one section of society by degrading another is such. Everything that secrets, deceives or prevents the progress of the well being of all individuals is such. Nationalism, capitalism, greed and corporate allegiance stand in the way of

progress. Mankind must be drawn from out the countless titles by which he has adorned himself and direct his actions unto the common goal of perfection; to be one flawless body of human beings.'

The publisher leaned back in his chair, took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Marcine returned to his office and sat down across from him.

"Finished?" Marcine asked more naturally than he before had spoken.

"Just the first section. Would you like some coffee?" The publisher asked as he rose from his chair and walked to the machine by his window. He looked outside, his mind empty, relaxing for a moment. He poured himself a cup and sat down. He had not even heard Marcine's request for a cup. He had forgotten he even asked. "All right. Back to it."

Marcine walked to the window and stared out. The publisher read:

'Part Two: The Duality of Man

'There is duality within man; a consciousness within the mind that this physical life, with its concerns and needs, is not the only plane in which we exist. In reality, there are multiple dualities within every person. There is the natural personality, that with which one is born, and the nurtured personality, that which evolves as one ages, shaped by parents, society, traumatic events; nearly everything. The magnitude of the nurtured self depends upon the strength and demeanor of the natural self and is most formative in the early years of life but maintains a changing hand throughout. Akin to this duality is that of the societal self and the individual self. Every person is different when alone as opposed to with a crowd. This duality varies and is linked closely to the personality, the combined natural and nurtured. It includes such things as peer pressure, advertising and fitting in; basically how much someone thinks about what other people think of them and how this effects their actions.

'Another duality is the religious or spiritual self and the every day self. Very few people can reconcile these. Consider how many people believe themselves Christians, read the words of Christ, what he says to do, yet in their daily actions conduct themselves adversely to what their religious self advises. Often this relates to the need to feel part of something. If everyone is laughing at the misfortune of someone else, it is easier to laugh with them than to listen to that righteous self and help the person in their trouble.

'All dualities overlap; the lines and sides are blurry, sometimes unapparent or reversed from what one might expect. A good example is the dual need for love and companionship. Yes, if in love a person will find also companionship, but companionship by itself is often adverse to the path of love. People settle to avoid loneliness, accepting companionship of a compatible nature. Here the levels within humanity become apparent. Two people on the same level have the ability to love each other. Those on levels near will make each other happy, be friends, but never find the extreme joy those on the same level will find. The further the levels are apart, the less people will find to like about each other.

“These levels within humanity are of ultimate importance to the happiness of people. Those surrounded by people on the same level are bound to be happy. This is true for everyone. The problem is that society pounds it within the minds of young and old alike that there is a certain way people should be and that a certain type of person is better than others. That is entirely wrong. These levels exist not to separate man in any kind of hierarchy, only that like and like might be happy. There is no level better than another. There is no good level or bad level, just as there are no good or bad people. They are merely different.

“The problem is that people are too concerned with attempting to make themselves feel as if they have found their level or attempting to be on a level they are not. And worse yet is that so many mock others needlessly and attempt to make their level seem less. It should not be this way. Mankind should be a shifting mass of individuals searching until they find the place they fit, the place they are happy most, and in this shifting and in these places, happiness should be their goal and everything should be carried out to procure this goal as long as, a vital point, their pursuit of this happiness does not hinder another person or group of people in this same pursuit. No man should insult another or deride him for his differences. No man should judge another. When they meet, it should be without preconception; they should speak truthfully, and if they cannot enjoy their time together, they should part amiably and think no more upon the person who has departed and seek still their happiness. And when people find others that make them happy, they should travel together through this life. The more they make each other happy, the closer they shall become, and if by chance two find themselves so close it is considered love, for what is love in its true sense but the apex of happiness, they should carry on with life the same; searching out happiness, never in hindrance of another; happy, always happy.

“This is how human existence should be traversed, but one might protest that it is impossible. Indeed it is far from anything mankind has known, but this does not make it impossible. It is but a matter of each person changing, winning those internal battles, fighting them if never before have they been waged, so that each person seeks to live for happiness while in consideration of others. Somewhere in each human being is the desire to live so happily. It is buried more in some than others, but it is there.

“It must begin with thought and understanding. No preconceptions. When a person speaks, listen, yet be not afraid to interrupt and say, “I appreciate your sharing, but this is no concern of mine.” And if this should be said, one should not be offended, merely smile and ask, “what would you like to speak about?” and if no subject can be found to bring both parties joy, then they should move on; to remain longer would hinder the happiness of both.

“In all people there is a commonality for all are human, but that a subject, action, is common does not make it right. Deception and peer pressure are adverse to happiness; the crowd often leads many unhappy individuals towards the goal of but a few. Stir not up to anger any other soul, and if anger arises

within ask, what is the cause? If a person stirs anger within another, this person should forget them and move on to those that bring happiness.

‘No one should think they are better than anyone else or that anyone else is better than they. No one is better than anyone else in life. In actions, yes, but they are of no import. It should be of no concern to a person whether someone else can run faster than they can; it matters only that they enjoy their run. And if they do not enjoy it, why run?’

‘There is nothing in this life a person must do. Yes, there are consequences for inaction as well as action, but a person must consider whether those consequences might more quickly bring them to happiness than the actions or inactions that would prevent those consequences.’

‘A person should consider their own happiness. Let all others consider their own. Yes, once a person is happy, they should help others attain likewise that place, but never at the jeopardy of their own happiness or the hindrance of another’s.’

‘It is within human beings to be happy. It, however, takes an effort which many are wont to undertake. That insult that just rolled off your tongue; did it decrease the target’s joy of life? The hours you worked in droll consideration; were they worth the weekend and nights you call your own? Have you ever made a choice that put your career ahead of your happiness? Have you deceived anyone lately? When you meet new acquaintances, how often do you wonder what you might gain from them? Does your occupation interrupt needlessly the lives of others? Are you happy? If not, change. Human beings always have the ability to change. It is a matter of doing so, of becoming happier, more free of thought and conscience, of reaching forward to a higher level, of attempting to be good, more than we have ever been or dreamed we might possibly be. Change. Search for those whom are upon the same level and together rise up into happiness, help others to happiness where the chance presents itself, while never allowing that search to burden the joy of anyone else, and for every person to live as such, every person to instill within their child to live as such, humanity will become a little less of what it has been and a little more of what it could be.’

The publisher turned the last page over and looked at Marcine, who was looking out the window, daydreaming. Marcine’s mind had begun to drift, and he was completely relaxed. His indifference had returned; his confidence. It did not matter what the publisher thought; it was good, and above that, it was his. From his mind had those ideas flowed, and no one would ever take that from him, even if another soul never read those words; they had blossomed in his soul. He had created, and that to him was success in life, irregardless of what others thought.

‘Well,’ he said, drawing Marcine’s gaze, ‘I have never read anything like it. Of course, I have not read much philosophy; not really my field. Makes you think, though.’ He paused, as if considering. ‘I can’t publish it, you know.’ Another pause. Marcine looked at the floor. ‘I just don’t know if there is a

market. I tell you what. Leave me a copy, and I will check around with a few people; see what I can find.”

“You can keep that copy.” Marcine said emotionlessly, and then added, “Thank you.” He headed to the door.

“One last thing.” The publisher said. “Do you believe what you wrote?”

“I don’t know.” Marcine said, pausing at the door. “I really don’t know.”

Chapter Three

Did he believe? In writing the paper he had never stopped to think about it, but now it ate at him. If he did not, how could he publish it? But if he did, how must he change his life so that he actually lived by that which he believed?

He sat in a bar on the same street as his apartment, pondering, sipping at already his third drink. He felt like getting drunk. It had been awhile. He normally lived in a half dream state anyway, but after his meeting with the publisher, he felt normal. And normal people drank, or at least all of them he knew. They would be in the bar in an hour or two, but at three thirty in the afternoon, he was alone with his drink.

His thoughts churned over the question. Not only whether he believed in what he wrote, but what did he believe in? What made him happy? Creation made him happy, that flowing art springing forth from his soul; new thoughts, new feelings bound together in tireless moments of life. Beauty made him happy. Human beauty; woman. The beauty of nature; a sunset, a bird floating free without seeming care in the world. Freedom; that made him happy.

“What are you thinking about?” A voice interrupted his thoughts. He had not even noticed the man enter the bar. He knew him a little; the owner of a medium sized corporation, still somewhat young; a proud man; a friend of a friend seemed the best description. A capitalist in all the good and bad of the word. Marcine did not feel like speaking but looked up. The capitalist sat across from him and peered into his face, awaiting an answer. Marcine’s mind changed. He would speak, and he did so with slow, thoughtful words, as if voicing the strain of thoughts which had been running through his mind.

“Have you ever seen a bird silhouetted by the sun setting betwixt clouds of gray, turning dark, black and whispered, ‘I wish I was free such as this spiraling life, warm with the dwindling sun as I gaze in wonder at the world beneath?’ These are my thoughts; they flow like a stream though the dull moments of life, opening my eyes to an existence which may or may not be. Yet how shall I discard these dreams (for what else are they) which instill my soul with joy in

order that I may take part in the small world you praise? Rather would I starve than bow down at the feet of greed.”

“Bow down?” Spoke the capitalist with a grin. “You are in a fine mood. It is not for greed that I pursue the riches of life but to provide for myself a better future.”

“But when you have obtained enough to supply yourself easily the rest of your days shall you then cease to desire more and quit yourself from the interwoven maze of society?”

“Poet, please; speak in plain language. Enough of your riddles and illusionary phrases. Enough. I have already the means to buy your life tenfold; how dare your insolent mouth question my worth. I am successful beyond anything you shall ever be.”

“The riches of life, of which you so plainly speak, mean nothing to me. That my soul is at peace; this is my ruby and diamond. You might buy my body, as you have accurately stated is within your means, but that which you did not consider is that it is not for sale. Nothing of consequence can be bought; not happiness, not love and certainly not eternity. Go then and conquer this world, and we shall see which of us, upon the moment of our passing, considers his life to have been joyous, upright and worthwhile.”

“Do not preach to me. I am not so selfish as you think. Every year I give of my own will a tenth of my salary to the desolate and poor. Every year...”

“Yes,” interrupted Marcine, “but if you could live on that ten percent and give ninety percent to these others.”

“I would be a fool.” The capitalist responded heatedly. “I am a charitable man, but I shall not allow others to live at my cost and do nothing.”

“Yet you do not protest that you could live on a much smaller salary.”

“I do not.”

“But you require individuals to work for your charity?”

“Not for charity but that they might earn a wage.”

“Then what of your own employees; if you have an excess salary yourself, consider increasing theirs so they might live more easily.”

“They live easily enough. I pay them well.”

“Then what of all those that purchase your goods; might they be helped if you were to decrease the price of your products?”

“Yes, but very little. My goods are individually inexpensive.”

“But were all those like you who provide already their employees adequately, and themselves, to decrease their prices to the point all wages could remain paid and these owners retain enough salary to live, how greatly then would the lives of all individuals be changed?”

“It would be great, I concede, but it is not for us to help these individuals but rather themselves that they might someday live comfortable, luxurious, lives such as us.”

“Have you a servant?”

“What relevance has that?”

“You have already answered, but of more importance, do you consider your servant’s life worthwhile?”

“I pay them well, and they are given vacation and medical.”

“But are their lives worthwhile?”

“How can I answer that? What determines the worth of a life?”

“You before said I questioned your worth, so, obviously, you have some notion of what it means. How do you judge your own life worthwhile?”

“I have been successful.”

“Have you been happy?”

“I have been content, I guess. I have not had time to be happy, but I am proud of my success and this brings me joy.”

“But is this moment of joy worth the countless moments which have passed in which you were too involved to be happy? Would it not have been better to be happy the entire time?”

“No one can be happy all the time.”

“Why not?”

“It is impossible.”

“Upon what proof; because you have not been?”

“No one has been. It is irrelevant. You were talking about servants. Why do you not keep to your arguments?”

“It is the same. I speak of their happiness, and yours.”

The capitalist stood hastily and walked to the bar. Marcine finished his drink and noticed for the first time an older man sitting at the table next to him. The man, smiling, nodded at Marcine and then rose and sat in the seat the capitalist had vacated.

“Another drink?” He asked and called a waitress to the table, ordering for both himself and Marcine. “Please forgive my friend for his rudeness; he is young and yet to appreciate good conversation.”

“He is no older than I am.” Said Marcine. He had never met this man, but he must have entered with the capitalist and been listening to them.

“Yes, but you are more wise for your age.”

“I would not know; wisdom is relative to each person’s opinion.”

“Perfect.” Said the man, smiling again. “You are a poet and painter?”

“Yes. What is perfect?”

“You are. Is your name well known?”

“Well enough that I have no other occupation. How am I perfect?”

“In time. In time. I, for one, do know your name. I have seen your work. It is very good, very unique.”

“Thank you.”

“What do you think of the political situation?” The man had turned more serious, as if he was finally getting to the topic he wanted to speak about.

“Everyone thinks things are going to change, but they won’t. Any new government will be essentially the same as the old. This is the situation you were referring to, correct?”

“Yes, yes. Perfect indeed. I agree with you; everyone running for office will make it just like it was. Did you know thirty-two people have already entered the election for president? Thirty-two! It is going to be wide open. But more than that, it’s not just a president we need but a new government. None of them will change the old government; they are all politicians, used to the system, bred in the system. They have no desire to do good or change things. That is where you and I come in.”

“How is that?”

“I have money, powerful friends, but we are tired of the old way of government. We want someone new. Somebody different, with a desire to do good. You.”

“It sounds like you want a puppet.”

“That is precisely what we do not want. Believe me, if we did, I would not approach you. You are young, passionate; these do not bode well for a puppet. We want you. A new government. A young government ready to change life in this country for the better.”

“Your better, I suppose.”

“We all need help, do we not? But remember, if we give you the country, you have no need to repay us. Some will expect you to, of course, but once you are in, what can they do to you if you steer things a little differently than they expect?” The man smiled as if the thought of Marcine doing such a thing, angering his friends, would amuse him significantly.

Marcine observed this. It seemed this man wanted to use him for a laugh; almost as if he had bet someone he could give anyone the country. But the thought of power is a great attraction, and he could not deny the experience would be exciting. Besides, he would not win.

“Is this serious?” He asked.

“Absolutely. As I said, there are thirty-two people already running. Of course less than a dozen have any hope, but irregardless, the vote is going to get split. We can get you elected. And remember this is different; you will have the power of a king. Think of it; a king.”

Chapter Four

How could anyone turn the offer down? Marcine sat in his campaign headquarters watching election results filter in. Balloting had been closed for only ten minutes. He was nervous, although he told himself it did not matter. It would have been easier, he thought, if he knew he was not going to win, like so many of the candidates; the position he had thought he would be in when he agreed to run. But the man had carried through with his promise. Marcine had been one of the three leading candidates in the polls for the past three months. He did not take much from those, however. It seemed ridiculous to judge an entire nation by polling a few thousand people, no matter how random they might be. He had even been in the lead in a few of the polls, but usually he was a close second or third. It was hard to tell what would happen. Forty-one people were on the ballot, and at least thirty were expected to take at least one percent. Five were expected to take at least ten percent. That alone was eighty percent of the vote. Twenty percent would certainly win. Fifteen was possible. No matter who won, it would be by the will of a small percentage of the people.

It had been hard at times, living so openly; his past besieged more than his intentions or who he was. When he began to rise in the polls, his adversaries had taken aim. They called him an artist, an outcast, too free of thought to rule. In response, he said little more than that they were entitled to their opinion. "I am merely casting my name out for the public to consider." He had said in an early interview. "If they feel I am the best candidate, I will do my best to prove them right. I do not claim to be the best person in this nation, whom I believe should rule. If this superior man was to arise and run, I would gladly withdraw my candidacy and support him. But such a person has not entered the race, and thus I believe I could help this nation more than anyone else in contention."

They said he was too young, too inexperienced. The media seemed to ignore this point. They seemed to ignore a lot about him. Either they did not consider him a serious candidate, or those powerful friends he had been told about had their hands involved. He saw their influence everywhere, even without seeing them. He knew only the man from the restaurant and the small campaign team he had assembled for Marcine. They knew their politics, and he fought often with them. He would not besmirch his opponents. They had folders on every serious candidate and urged him to take aim, as they did to him. He refused. One of his staff quit. The next day he was back and more flexible. Someone had spoken to him; one of those friends.

He traveled constantly; giving speeches, shaking hands, interviews and public appearances. He began losing grip. Sometimes he felt as if he was not himself. He would find himself sitting alone, and he felt uncomfortable. He always used to love his solitude. He heard himself speak, and the words were

not his. He was always tired, even though he slept more than he had in many years. He remembered once, after a speech and dinner, sitting in a hotel room, looking at himself in the mirror. His skin did not seem to fit his face. His body did not seem his. The eyes were different, empty. Within called the spirit of his art, and he realized he had forsaken himself. He had become involved in the campaign. He had let it become stressful. He smiled at himself in the mirror and shrugged his shoulders. It did not matter if he won. He felt better after that and listened less to his staff and more to himself. He stopped giving prepared speeches. He nearly stopped giving speeches altogether, instead answering questions from the crowds and reporters. He was relaxed; he felt again like himself. And he gained in the polls, especially after the debates with the other leading candidates. Beside them he looked young, affable and intelligent.

The first numbers were in; twenty percent of the votes counted. He was in second place with just under eighteen percent. The leader had only a third of a percentage point lead, while a third candidate stood at fifteen percent. It was as expected. These two were always atop the polls. The third place candidate was a retired army general who had sided with the revolting soldiers and carried strong support with military men and people who thought rebuilding an army of supreme importance. The leading candidate was a career politician. He had ruthlessly attacked Marcine's past and inexperience, and had he not been so closely tied with the old government, he likely would have pulled away from all competition. The remainder of the candidates were primarily politicians from cities and provinces. A few businessmen had also entered, one of whom was fourth in the returning results at twelve percent. He had spent more money than all of the candidates combined. Marcine's actual campaign ran on a minimal budget, but he knew a great deal of money had been spent on him unofficially. And when forty percent of the votes had been counted and he trailed by only six thousand votes, he realized that he might actually win, and the uneasy feeling returned that some of the people that had spent that money might expect something in return.

He was onset by doubt as he considered the future potentially before him. He had never sought power, but he had dreamed often of the actions he might undertake if ever he owned it. These actions would not be looked upon well by those that had funded him, and if they were powerful enough to have him elected, they might also have the means to replace or disgrace him. He would have to be careful if he wanted to rule for any length. But it did not matter how long he ruled, he realized, if he did so for that time to the uppermost of his ability. He needed only to lay the groundwork for a state of a new model. The philosopher would be king, if only for a short time. Hopefully, long enough to do something worthwhile. Besides, what would be the worst anyone could do to him? He would rather be killed or displaced doing what he believed was right than attempting to please the interests of an unknown array of lobbyists.

With seventy-five percent counted, he had taken the lead, albeit slightly. The campaign workers buzzed with excitement. He had passed into the nineteenth percentage point, while the career politician had remained in the eighteenth. The general had dropped below fifteen percent, while a few of the others had gained ground, although they remained far distant.

Updates streamed in constantly, and while the margin varied, his lead continued to hold. He found he was nervous and began to pace the hall between his office and the open room where the campaign staff worked. Outside were thousands of people whom cheered every time updates were given. He thought back to his life before he had entered the race. He had never voted or particularly cared about politics, except in the historical, philosophical and theoretical standpoints. It had no relevance to his life, but these people; he did not understand. Why would they stand outside his building with signs and cheer for his election? What did they gain from it? He understood they might prefer him to others, and thus vote for and even support him, but to stand outside for hours simply that they might be there to hear him speak upon his victory, or even his defeat. It reminded him almost of how people acted when the pope visited the country a few years previously. Hundreds of thousands had lined the streets simply to watch him pass by in a car, and then as many packed an outdoor stadium to listen to him pronounce a few minutes of worship. And it was not just the fact that they went to see him, he understood the importance of religion to people, but the way they looked upon and spoke of the pope. They praised him almost as if he was God. They grew weak with emotion at the sight of him, looked with awe upon him. He never could understand how people could look upon any other person with such deference. The pope was but a man. A president or king was but a man. No human being is above others in such a way as people glorify individuals above themselves. Marcine knew he was merely a man, yet there might be those that looked upon him or would come to look upon him in a similar manner. Fame was a mystery to him, yet it had clutched him to its bosom and presented him to a grand many faces, some of whom no doubt did turn their eyes upon him with looks akin to awe.

He had won. He shook hands with the campaign workers and marveled at the absurdity of it. Nineteen point one percent. He had won the land by the will of one fifth of the seventy percent of its people that turned out to vote. Fourteen percent his mind quickly thought, and that excluded the children. And how many people had voted for him only to see someone else defeated? He could not know, but the fourteen percent ran through his thoughts. How many of those votes had been bought by the money of his unseen backers? It was ridiculous, he realized, but then he was overrun by congratulations and rushed outside to a podium and the awaiting thousands. They celebrated raucously, and every time he waved, the cheers increased. It still amazed him that they should take so much joy in the success or life of someone else. But his pride did surge,

he consented, to hear them chant his name and to know their joy was for him, that he was to them someone important.

The crowd quieted, waiting for him to speak. What could he say? He did not know as he stepped to the microphone, and he hesitated, passing his eyes once more over the faces below him. Yes, there were faces out there that regarded far too much of him. And then he began to speak.

“No greater responsibility may be placed upon a man than the welfare and support of his fellow citizens, and today, with such a responsibility have I been entrusted. I am grateful for this opportunity, and though I know the path may at times become clouded, I shall endeavor always to act in such a way to benefit this great nation. I have been elected to govern no one but rather to facilitate the functions necessary to the common welfare, continuity and happiness of the citizens of this country. No longer shall the many carry out the whims of a few but instead the few shall seek to fulfill the needs of the many.”

Applause deafened him as he returned to his office. “What now?” He thought. He sat at his desk and poured a glass of wine. He could not help but wonder how well he would do.

Chapter Five

They sat drinking wine, Marcine and a friend, speaking of the future and how things might be.

“I envision a forest,” said Marcine, “of manmade trees, each shimmering in the beauty of the twilight, the leaves breathing the last rays of the sun to bring power to man’s machines. Finally have the engineers abandoned the unnatural corners they have always made and found in nature the model which Art has always mimicked. On the branches of these great trees sit gigantic birds of every type; how beautiful their feathers gleam. One takes flight and alights on a branch a mile away. Upraise its wings to reveal a family of humans. Happily they walk into their home, returning from a visit to a friend. The father pauses before the door to pluck some fruit growing from the tree; an apple, a mango and a tangerine grow together on the same artificial branch, all delicious, all free. Inside the house their pets come bounding to greet them. What is this? A polar bear the size of a dog and beside it a lion of stature same. The children frolic with the beasts while the father delivers the fruits upon the table where soon all assemble to merrily enjoy their feast. Even the lion partakes for in his altered genes, he as well has lost his taste for meat. Oft on the ground below does he romp about with sheep and cows. And this ground; how beautiful it is. There are pathways of perfect green grass, which seems always cut but never is a

workman present; again the human race has bettered nature. How grand these greenways look as they run between and overtop a grand array of gentle streams. Here children swim with dolphins, as well as a dog or two. And down the paths adults do run, joyous, innocent, almost childlike as well.

“Follow a stream to the forest’s edge and gaze upon the nature spreading forth its grandeur. Here manmade birds fly beside the authentic machinery. These trees power but their own growth, and amongst them creep and crawl all natural creatures, untouched, unharmed, alone and free. Go aloft in a peaceful bird; how quiet its wings do flap, softer than the real thing. Gaze upon the vast plains where herds of buffalo and cattle roam. Here they are hunted by the wolf, and the bear grabs greedily at his salmon prey. Great rivers flow unhindered, teeming with life and waterfalls. Nature has reclaimed its land; rather man has conceded it for all he needs is within his cities. Here is another one. We land upon another branch and enter within the great oak shaped building. People laugh merrily amongst themselves, moving about amongst each other, always smiling, always happy. These here are all single people, men, women, in search of love. There are no games as in ancient times; they merely drift amongst each other, amiable always, searching for a heart which touches theirs. And when they find such bliss? Then they shall become as one, traveling about this great earth, meeting all peoples, deciding where they shall settle. And when they do, they raise their own children from the moment of their birth until, when these children reach maturity, the parents fare them well in search of their own true love.”

“It sounds like Eden.” Said the friend.

“What else should mankind attempt to create?”

Chapter Six

The boat rolled with the waves, and Marcine steadied himself on the handrails as he gazed into the water. A fish streamed past, and he told the captain to stop. Immediately the order was carried out, and Marcine retreated aft to eat a small lunch and stare across the waves, leaning back after his meal to soak in the sun and relax. He napped a little and daydreamed; through his mind swam the fish, and Marcine swam beside. He chuckled as he sipped a fresh glass of lemonade the steward placed beside him. For a moment he had forgotten where he was, who he was. He had felt like he used to feel when he was alone. But he was never alone anymore. Even now, while he drifted through his thoughts and watched the seagulls float overhead, there were three men on the boat just to protect him, that aside from the four-man crew. And this was the

nearest he had come to a peaceful moment to himself in the months he had been in office.

There was so much yet to do. It amazed him how inefficient the government was, as well as how entirely linked its decisions were to large corporations and political contributions. He had never cared for politics, but he had always lived in the misconception that the people that ran the country attempted to do so with at least some regard to the well-being of the populace. The illusion had instantly vanished. He had been in office less than a day before he was beset by varying parties seeking his consideration on matters of their own interest. This in itself did not confound him but rather the types of requests they approached with. A majority were matters the national government should have had no hand in, while others were contradictory to what he had considered even the most common sense.

He turned them all away and locked himself in his office with a copy of the budget. So much money was wasted, he saw immediately; so many expenditures and programs that should not exist and so many others that should have existed that did not. He began to remove and change the figures. It would take weeks, months, and always he was interrupted. And usually he was disturbed for meaningless things or to meet with people he had no need to see. He had work to do; did they not understand? Of course not, he realized; they assumed things would gradually revolve back to the way they had been before the revolt. The entire system needed to be changed before any good could be accomplished. The purpose of the government needed to be reestablished with a higher cause than ever before it had held. Corruption, lobbying and deception needed to be erased. Simply, the mindset of the nation needed to be reformed. He set aside the budget and began to dive through the laws and systems of not only his nation but all others as well. He fed and searched the inspiration of his mind, seeking within the source of poetry for a means to turn philosophy into actuality.

At last he began to write. He was not sure what it was, only that if he was to lead a nation it would be under no system in existence. He worked long hours, up to twenty hours a day, crafting his nation on paper, meditating, researching, considering every detail until it was complete. Yet he doubted himself. It was a risk to deliver a change such as this upon an unsuspecting people, more so upon the politicians and lawmakers. There would be only one way to do it; to give the citizens of the nation the chance to adopt his plan. And so he announced to the nation his intention to refashion the entire way of life within its borders, if they desired it. He did not read from the document that day, nor had anyone else read it.

The following morning he called another press conference and delivered fifty copies, which he printed himself, to the media with instructions to reprint and distribute freely. After this conference, he for the first time gave the file to his secretary to be printed and distributed throughout the government.

After the press conference he had gone directly to the yacht, which sat always at dock for his use, and ordered it to sea. He briefly wondered what the reaction was to his plan, *The Betterment and Equality of Society*. Then he returned to consideration of the birds and waves. Something would happen, no doubt, but he would deal with that later. He rang the bell for the steward and ordered another drink. When it came, he took a few sips and then sat back, closed his eyes and listened to the calming sounds of the sea. Then the daydreams returned.

Chapter Seven

The Betterment and Equality of Society

There is no greater responsibility by which a nation is bound than to the happiness of its citizens. A government cannot coerce, force or bribe the people it has been created to serve in any fashion to increase their happiness, it can only certify their freedom to seek this happiness and instill in them that their primary duty as citizens is to be happy, provided their happiness does not decrease that of their fellow citizens. This happiness must be the pride of the nation, and to it must all business, technology and education be directed.



AUTHOR'S NOTES: This chapter will never be completed as I envisioned; simply, Marcine's plan. I am incapable of writing such a document to the extent and with the detail it would need. And, unable to produce such a plan in full, I will not attempt in part. Yes, I might have consigned myself to the research attributed to Marcine and delved within the laws and philosophies thus far put forth in the history of man in order that I might compare with them my own notions and to be certain that no detail was left uncovered. I might have done this, but it to me does not seem worth the effort to do so. In this story, Marcine was in a position whereas such a work might actually produce change. I am in no such place, and while such concepts as how best to arrange the community of man interest me, I am content to read such books as have been written in my own time and at my own pleasure. Perhaps, when I am old and have duly considered all I feel necessary to construct such a political theory or system, I shall take up pen and attempt to do so. For now I have but the scattered, wandering, sometimes passionate, thoughts of youth, and for the purposes of this story, they shall have to suffice to illuminate what I envisioned Marcine to have produced.

The plan was to have been written in a general outline form, beginning with a brief introduction, such as that which began this chapter, to be followed as such: I. Introduction (in depth); II. Structure of Government; III. Education; IV. Law; V. Foreign Policy; VI. Summary.

Each heading would be further separated, down to the minutest detail necessary. For example, Education would be divided first into a summary or overview and a plan for an ideal school (such ideal plans would be present wherever applicable). Each of these sections would be divided in the most organized manner. Foreign policy would include trade, as well as military. Trade regulations would be listed individually with each regulation, the reason for it and the consequence for breaking it. Law would likewise be divided. This is an example of how a criminal law paragraph might begin:

“Murder. If any human being is found guilty by due process of the murder of any other human being or beings, the remainder of his or her life shall be forfeit to the benefit of society. This person, upon conviction, shall be confined in prison until death. He or she shall receive no visitation or social interaction. This individual shall be considered dead to society, but in death shall he or she benefit society by performing such labor as is provided by the confining facility. While performing such labor, the convicted individual shall work alone, if feasible within their living cell. Individuals convicted of murder must be confined in conditions where escape is infeasible.”

This leads to a great many other paragraphs, such as the difference between murder and manslaughter, the definitions of each and any exceptions, if any, to the law. For crimes which do not hold such a stiff sentence, the paragraphs would probably be longer and more inclusive. The system of sentencing, which is more service than punishment based, will be mentioned in more depth later.

One begins to see the magnitude of such a document. Consider all the crimes, even to the smallest offences, for if this document is to replace the old laws, it must be all inclusive. But now to the ideas which drive this plan. The first have already been written at the beginning of the chapter. These ideals must be the basis for everything else. To repeat.

1. The government does not rule, it facilitates the needs of the nation.
2. It is vital that all facets of society are carried forth to benefit the happiness and well-being of the citizens and that nothing detrimental to this happiness is condoned.
3. Education shall be focused on teaching children that happiness, of self and all individuals, is the highest goal in life and that it is the greatest wrong to disturb the happiness of someone else.

These are idealistic, true, but should not a nation at least attempt to be good? To this end must all be focused. The government must be as small as possible. It must work as efficiently as possible and under no circumstances be

run to any purpose other than that of the well-being of the nation. In an ideal state, the government would nearly vanish as society would become nearly self-standing. As crime evaporates, so does the need to prevent and punish it. Erase the false businesses of deception and marketing, and there shall be no need to regulate them. If there are no patents and trademarks, there are no laws or regulations to enforce regarding them. Begin to erase these things, and others like them, and the economy will equalize itself. If companies are allowed to fail, then there would, again, be no regulating bodies to prevent their failure. Eventually the number and types of businesses would reach equilibrium, as would employee numbers and hours. When overall well-being is the goal, new businesses will not be created simply for the reason that there are the number of people to sustain them. Instead, the existing companies will hire more people and reduce the hours of all, while maintaining an even wage, thus increasing the time each individual may spend on his or her own pursuit of happiness. The goal is to have everyone in the nation fed, housed, clothed and entertained for the minimum individual output possible. If such can be attained with every individual working forty hours a week, so be it, but likely this can be reached with everyone working much less than that. Consider the increase of overall happiness if instead of five eight hour days, generally more considering commutes and unpaid lunch hours, people worked four six hour days. Consider further if instead of two weeks vacation a year, people had two months. If balanced correctly it is probable either the hours would be even less or the vacation more, if not both.

It must be admitted that many laws need remain. Although many people would think of would not be included. In foreign trade there would be slight tariffs, if any at all. The government in no way would help domestic businesses. In fact, business and government should be almost entirely separate. Government should step in only when a business infringes on the happiness of individuals or, worse yet, harms them, such as when a drug company attempts to produce and sell a product with adverse side effects beyond the good of the product. Here, alike to most facets of life, the simple test of should, not can, something be done or made is appropriate. If you must convince people they need your product, they probably do not. Thus, do not make it. If you would not buy it yourself, do not make it. But should someone produce a product that harms no one but is useless or completely unnatural, the government need not step in or prohibit this business. If the citizens are educated properly, this product, this business, will fail. Stores, if owned by individuals that have been taught reason, will not stock this product. And if they do, no one will buy it. The only time the government would intercede would be if the product is dangerous or a complete waste of resources. Of course, in the beginning of the instrumentation of this system, the government would need to regulate the products to some extent, but with each generation it would exercise less and less control. This would be true in every facet of government.

Here is dangerous ground to tread, for indeed the system has similarities to communism, and history has shown the difficulties of any government to let go. Lenin and Trotsky spoke of easing off the government when they claimed power, but the communist dream turned quickly into a mean dictatorship. How can this be prevented? Again, education. Business would be eased into the new format while the minds of children are taught the new ideals of communal well-being through individual happiness instead of the self-usury which is now propagated. It cannot be stressed enough that business, while intertwined with the common goal of communal happiness and progress, must remain separate from government. But to curtail this statement a moment; business does not include all that business pertains to in most capitalist nations. Look instead to the socialist type system. Medicine, electricity, telephone, water, sewer; all these would be government entities, or rather they need not be government but they must not seek a profit. If the entire nation can receive electricity for a dollar a day, then charge a dollar a day, or perhaps a dollar and five cents, the balance being used to build new lines, as well as to upgrade to and research technologies. If it could be done for less, then less would be charged. The same must apply to all such utilities and, in truth, to most businesses. If technology is common knowledge, the vast secrecy and profit drives disappear. Three companies need not discover the same technology; when one does, they all receive the knowledge and seek to improve upon it. This is true of all technologies, save weapons, if there is, unfortunately, a need to produce weapons. Anyone who has the materials and tools could produce whatever they wish. But what of the safety of amateurs? Once more, education. It must be instilled in people not to attempt what is beyond them; rather to educate themselves before attempting anything unknown. But better they experiment than live in undesired ignorance. And if a few such individuals are injured experimenting? So be it. They have learned from their mistakes. And if they shall die? Others will learn from it. It is not a government's duty to completely coddle people so that they do not exercise their own reason. Consider also, who would build their own television when to buy one costs scarcely more than the materials to make it. Remove the inflated costs created by advertising, lobbying, patenting and marketing and this would be true. The only costs will be salaries of employees and material costs.

The mention of salaries again returns to the principles of education. Remove greed as much as is possible; rather do not teach it, and in combination with the nurtured desire to benefit all as well as one's self, this will produce a society in which salaries for all occupations are similar, perhaps eventually equal, for whom among the citizens shall claim to be worth more than another? Reduce money to what it was designed to be, a simpler means of trade, rather than an entity in itself. Remove the desire for wealth and replace it with the desire for happiness. It cannot be stated enough: it begins with education.

But how does one teach such ideals to human beings? Begin at their birth. Make human beings of your children, and they shall all find trades and occupations when they age, but more so they shall learn to be happy.

Much of what children are taught in today's education systems is irrelevant. Education should focus on but two things; teaching children how to learn and how to interact with each other. The facts and figures now shoved in their minds do little good. Such things are generally forgotten in a short period of time. Think back and recall your education; what do you recall, the twenty-first president or the crush you had on the boy or girl sitting in the row across from you? Teach a child to learn and when he is an adult and wonders who that president was, he shall know where to find out.

Interaction amongst children must be encouraged; how else will they know how to interact when they are adults? Do not merely tell them that a general sense of well-being and happiness is to their advantage, let them experience it. Instill in them that people, not things, are important.

These are not new ideas. It is rare anyone thinks something someone has not before considered. If one read every book ever written, ideas and concepts would be repeated without end, and these are just some of the ideas of the few people whom have taken the time to write such things down. What of the shepherd whom diagramed the universe in his mind while he gazed upon the stars during his midnight watch? His thoughts disappeared with him. Does this mean that his thoughts were wasted? Of course not. It merely means he was content to live his life and to think his own thoughts. Teach children to do the same, and they shall not judge one another or seek constantly to compare themselves. They will seek only be themselves, no more, no less.

In an ideal education, personalities would be embraced and left free to develop into what they might be. While nurturing the child's personality to be a higher type of human being, let the natural side be free. If he wants to chase a butterfly for an hour, let him, watch him, join him; attempt to reclaim the innocence in which he still exists.

To change topics; religion. This is easily arranged for in this nation there should be absolute freedom of religion, assuming, of course, the fulfillment of religious practices does not disturb the well being of others. This should not strike hard, however, for at the core of nearly every religion are principles of such tolerance and love towards mankind. The government should be separated entirely from religion, except where fanaticism may arise. Again, if the system is successful, fanaticism will be rare. Children should be taught to look with open minds upon all things, including the varying religions and philosophies of mankind. Never should anyone disparage the beliefs of anyone else, while at the same time, people should not be afraid to discuss such topics. Here, however, a point should be reiterated. Should someone not want to speak of such things, our citizens, educated to respect above all the well-being and happiness of others, will kindly drop or avoid the subject. This shall be true of all topics.

To return to the criminal system. No matter how vehemently one envisions the citizens of a country interacting without crime, it will never be a reality. It will arise, although with each succeeding generation it should decrease.

Sentences should be based on community service, or service to those affected by the crimes committed, with detention as a last resort. Ideally, the service should be carried out so that the convicted person's fine is used to the greatest possible potential. If a bricklayer commits a crime, let him lay bricks as a sentence. (I am aware of the apparent contradiction of calling a person a bricklayer, when earlier I write to make human beings of people. The point is, have convicts do what serves the community most appropriately, generally that which they know best how to do.) He would serve no prison time, depending on the crime. Instead he would live at home, pay his bills, eat his own food, work his occupation and then, in what should be his time to relax, he would repay the debt he has incurred to society. Yes, fines would be levied, but in addition some service would be required. A thief, for example, would pay back what he has taken, plus a percentage fine, and as well undertake service for a set amount of time. If someone cannot pay a fine, additional service shall take its place.

If a man that owns acreage, above a plot for his home, commits a crime and is unable to pay the fine, let his debt be paid by a forfeiture of a portion of his land. And on this land let that bricklayer, having been convicted of a crime, build with bricks made by a convicted brick maker a public building designed by an architect also guilty of indiscretion. So on and so forth. As long as people commit crimes, let them benefit society. It does no good to lock people up; to feed and clean them. Yes, this would be the final option, but even in prison let them produce something. Assign to these prisoners the tasks no one wants to do; hard labor, repetitive assembly jobs; whatever arises. Make prison nearly unbearable. This way people would fear going back. Each prisoner should be held in isolation for at least the first three months of their sentence, or the entire sentence if it is less than that. Feed them in their cells. They shower in their cells. Importantly, they maintain the cleanliness of their cells. And of entertainment and such benefits? They have forfeited the right to such things. Remember, for most crimes confinement would be only necessary if the convict failed to conduct his or her community service. Other crimes, such as rape, child molestation and murder; these individuals have violated so severely the ideals of humanity that they do not deserve anything but the basic essentials of life. They would not be starved, or harmed, but they would receive no luxury. Their thoughts alone would they have during the fulfillment of their sentence, save religious texts if they so request. Yes, this seems harsh, but prison as such would be a deterrent to any would be criminals, especially if they had already served time. A week so imprisoned would effect the ordinary man quite severely. But once the time has been served, the fine paid or service completed, let there be no ill will towards these individuals. Everyone errors; that they have

accounted, and hopefully learned, is all that matters. Every crime would have a set sentence, increasing in severity with the frequency of such crimes, but of repeat criminals there would be few, one would imagine; again, after a few generations. No system can slide flawlessly into place.

Similar to prisons should be homeless shelters, in reference only to the simplicity of the buildings. Each room would have only a bed, a table and two chairs. There would be a closet, as well as a small bathroom with sink, toilet and shower. Also a small kitchen, in the main room. The kitchen might be ignored if the building has a cafeteria, but to give someone a concept of a home, even one this bare, it holds they should have a place to cook that own meals.

In the building should be a career center, a medical clinic and counseling services. The goal is to give people a place to stay while they reenter society. The rooms would be small and bare to give anyone not willing to call such home motivation to earn a better place. It is shelter and a means for cleanliness. Cleanliness, incidentally, should be instilled in children at a young age. It is an important step in the education of order. There is no harm being dirty, often it is enjoyable, but children should want to be clean, if nothing else when they lie down to sleep at night.

The buildings should also be equipped with warm water showers and restrooms available to the public, as well as with cots or bunks to handle potential overflow. Ideally no one would remain long in such places, but if they did, work around the building would be required to remain.

Although the term homeless shelter is used, these buildings would also be a refuge to travelers who either could not afford a hotel or merely wanted to experience life as such. Anyone could stay in them, no questions asked unless the stay exceeds more than a handful of days. If such places existed in every town, the citizens of the nation would always have somewhere to turn in the time of need, and at a minimal cost. They should be places in which no one would be ashamed to stay, yet it would be difficult to consider it a home unless the individual seeks no more, such as monks, someone on a spiritual journey or a wandering youth. Hotels, like all else, would eventually be rid of unnecessary usury. Thus, if the hotel can rent the rooms for twenty dollars a day, it will, even if before it charged a hundred.

There is nothing as useless to the well being of a nation as an active army. It produces nothing, yet it consumes greatly. This aside from the false ideals it instills in the citizens of its nation by its mere existence. Consider the dictatorships which claim communism. Military is the downfall of their systems. A good example is North Korea, whose military first leadership has reduced its citizens to poverty. For every soldier there is one less citizen to produce something; in this case much needed food or goods to sell for food.

Ideally, the nation would have no military, but more realistically, every citizen would be a member of the military. Arm every citizen, teach them the basics of fighting, and should any nation dare invade this peaceful country,

chaos would be unleashed upon them as from every house and office would descend a barrage of gunfire and artillery. There would be no greater breach of the ideals of common happiness than to propagate war, and thus in retribution for this alone is such force acceptable.

Diplomacy, of course, is always the first option, but in no case will the nation yield to any unkind foreign power. And if the leader of another nation defies diplomacy and rallies himself to lead his nation to war? Then, if the chance should arise, take this leader's life. Rather his one life be forfeit than those of countless soldiers and innocents who desire not and gain nothing from the war. A head of state should not have the power to tell anyone to die.

Much has been overlooked, detail could be gone into for even what has been said, but for the purpose of this story, such as has been written shall suffice. As for Marcine's plan; imagine that it is well written and true throughout to the ideal of communal and individual happiness. In his mind at least, should it be put into practice, the nation would run with a fluidity and charm that no nation has yet to achieve. And, perhaps, it would be an example to the world that such a better state might exist.

Chapter Eight

The press awaited Marcine as he disembarked the yacht. Others were there too; protesters, staff members and people who came for reasons he did not know.

"How do you respond to the threats...?" The question from the reporter was drowned out by the hum of a thousand voices. Other bits drifted to his ears as he was escorted to a car. "Do you think it will pass?" "You communist bastard!" "God bless you." "What did you mean in paragraph twelve...?" "What will you do if it does not pass?" "How do you respond to the legal injunction?"

Through all he walked silently, but at the car, he paused and turned towards the crowds, waiting until they were silent before speaking.

"I have presented to the people of this nation the nation I visualize it might be. If the citizens of this land do not want the government I have offered them, they need only vote no. Of threats and injunctions, I will say only that it would be a shame if the people are denied the chance to choose their government because a handful of others attempt to decide for them that they do not deserve that chance."

He said naught else and turned into the car. Within sat the man by whom he had been elected. They had not spoken since the night of the election, and they were silent until the car was moving.

“Well,” the man said, turning to Marcine, a dry look on his face, yet a bit of amusement in his eyes, “you surprised even me.” Marcine looked at him vacantly but did not speak. The older man continued. “I have been sent as a messenger.” He paused, looked out the window a moment and then turned back to Marcine. “If you do not withdraw your request for a public vote, your life... Well, it is not safe. Put it through government channels, let it be changed, adapted, turned down a few times and revised; that is all anyone asks.” He paused again and inched closer to Marcine whom remained yet emotionless. “Of course, they will drive you out of office, but the document will live on. They cannot destroy it after what you did. That was brilliant, giving to the press like that. Brilliant.”

“How much time do I have?” Marcine said after a moment. He knew there were more sides to this issue, avenues he could seek out, but he was suddenly tired of it all. He had given the groundwork for a great nation, if only the people would follow through. But it would not work, he realized. It was too idealistic, too great a leap from the system in place.

“It depends on what you decide.” He leaned back and looked forward.

“I will not withdraw the vote.”

“Then you do not have much time. A day perhaps, maybe a few. They can get to you; you know that. As easily as I sit here beside you, they can have you killed. But they will want to do it in such a way as to smear your image.”

Marcine told the driver to stop the car.

“Get out.” He said bluntly. The man obeyed but poked his head back in briefly.

“It would be interesting,” he said, “to see if it would work.”

Then he was gone, and Marcine was alone with his thoughts, although in the front seat sat the driver and a security agent. He no longer felt he could trust them. He could trust no one anymore.

Chapter Nine

He locked the door when he entered his bedroom and sat on his bed wondering how they would come for him. Then he realized he would not let them. He had that much control over his life. He poured himself a drink. A moment later he poured a second and then a third. He knocked the bottle on the floor but did not pick it up. He did not care anymore. Life did not seem

real. Indeed, how could he believe that he, a marginally known artist, was being threatened for delivering to a populace a change of government? He laughed at the thought and pulled a piece of paper from a desk drawer.

“I confess;” he wrote, “I am not strong enough, woefully weak when most I need strength. I attempted so eagerly to build a magnificent kingdom; how peaceful it would have been; how quickly it was torn under in a horde of paranoia and ignorance. I am almost convinced that these people, by the means they took to undermine my efforts, have no desire for anyone to be happy.”

He reread the note once and then removed the painting hanging behind the desk. He opened the safe, so obviously he thought, behind the picture. It made him chuckle. From within the safe he removed an old wooden box, which upon opening revealed an old single shot pistol and ammunition given to him as an inauguration gift by the ambassador of an unusually friendly country. He wondered what that man thought of his actions this day. He shrugged. It did not matter. None of it did. In death all would be forgotten anyway. He smiled at the thought; his unbelief returned after an interval of passionate work. It made him feel better.

He opened the pistol and placed a round in the chamber. He closed the weapon and stared at it. His thoughts struck momentarily empty, and then he turned his eyes from the handgun to the painting he had removed from the wall. He had never liked it but had never taken time to change it out. There was one in the hallway to his office he liked much better. It was of an angel whom smiled as he held a newborn fawn in his arms. It had been painted two hundred years earlier for the inauguration of a former president.

He set the pistol down and recovered the bottle from the floor. He took a swig and then dropped it again. He was motionless for a minute and then turned to the paper and once more wrote, “You will not find my body. It will be beneath the waves, cast off from this nation as it seems righteousness shall forever be.”

He signed beneath these lines and then took a second bullet from the box and stood it on top of the note. Then, from the safe he removed a briefcase, replaced it with the wooden box and closed the door. He placed the pistol in his belt at the small of his back and cautiously left the room.

In his library he had weeks before discovered a staircase descending into a tunnel. It set off an alarm when he had accidentally opened it, but it was the only way he could leave the building alone. The tunnel was a quarter of a mile long and exited into a small house. They had been built at the same time, but the records showed that only a handful of people knew about the tunnel.

He opened the passageway, descended the stairs and ran to the house. He paused before entering. Security agents would be waiting for him; they were always there.

But they were not, and he could not help but think of the long arms now threatening him. It seemed a reasonable route to assassinate him, and surely

they had power to divert a few of his security personnel. He wondered how powerful his enemies were. Surely it was not only the men that had financed and swayed his election. He did not know if anyone supported him.

He was quickly out of the house and into a passing cab. He was suspicious of even this individual, although the driver seemed to take no notice of him. They spoke of the rain, a light mist which had come with sunset. The cabbie talked at length, while Marcine made enough sounds to prod him.

He tipped the driver well when he was dropped off at the marina and then made his way to the yacht. The guards here remained posted, and as he approached, they hastened to intercept him.

“You can’t come down here. Oh, it’s you sir. Didn’t expect you this late. Should we call the crew sir?”

“No, no.” Marcine said. “I just need to get a few things on board.”

“Yes sir. Do you need any help sir?”

“No. I’ll just be a few minutes. You guys stay in your hut and stay warm. I will stop in on my way back and have some coffee if you have some.”

“Yes sir. Thank you sir.”

He walked with the two guards to their small house and then continued to the yacht. Climbing on board, he looked back at the guard shack. He could see them moving around in the light, probably making his coffee. He untied the dock lines and then looked back again. One guard was still moving around, but the other was motionless, looking out either towards the street or towards the boat. He could not tell from the silhouette which way he faced.

He did not know how to start the engines, but he had watched the sailors raise the sails that morning. Before they were half way up the ship lurched forward, scraping along the dock. At the wheel, he took a compass reading and held that course until the lights disappeared over the horizon.

He brought the sails down, and the yacht was adrift in the black emptiness of the night sea. He listened. There were sounds he did not know; sounds of a different life. Distant now were all those things he was running from; the threats, the foolery of government, his own and that of others.

He opened one of the containers on deck. It had life preservers. He opened the other. It had diving equipment. From this he lifted a weight belt. He replaced it with the pistol and then stripped. He left the belt and clothing on deck and went to his cabin. Here he dressed in new clothes before returning to the deck where he tied his old clothes, except his coat, to the weight belt and threw it overboard. He tossed the coat after and turned his attention to lowering the small motorboat that served as a lifeboat for the yacht. When it was lowered, he stepped in with his briefcase and cut the lines loose. Then, with compass reversed, he headed back to land.

Conclusion

I

Marcine rolled onto his back and stretched. He looked at the ocean and smiled, remembering the night he had died. He had nearly smashed the boat on some rocks, but other than that the suicide had been a complete success. They found the yacht, the pistol and his shirt, and though the boat he had taken had not been found, it seemed unnoted by the media. Perhaps that was his “friends” again. He did not know, or care. A dead man, with a briefcase of cash, he had found it easy to disappear.

He sat now on a warm beach in front of the small house he had purchased with a false name. Few questions were asked in such places when one paid cash. No one bothered him, and he ignored most of what went on around him. Life was as it had been; free. Inspiration and passion again controlled his life, and he was writing poems once more, which he figured he would publish under his real name a few years later, just to see how people would react. Or maybe he wouldn't. He kind of liked being dead.

II

People called for the vote. Other people prevented it. It was ruled against the law. Proponents stated that it was the new law. Opinions grew ravenous, while demonstrations of all kinds sprouted seemingly from the ground. People cried out murder, they called Marcine a martyr, a prophet, a savior. Others called him a dreamer, a communist, an instigator. The turmoil of the war began to reemerge; indeed it had not died, only paused long enough to see things attempt to change and fail.

A certain wealthy business owner stated publicly that he was glad Marcine was dead but wished it had happened months earlier. That same man was shot three days later, and while many people saw him slain, few seemed to care. Still, despite the unrest raging in the collective mind, the nation continued to work. Yes, people took a day off on occasion to protest, but the machine continued to turn. Most people simply could not afford to become involved. They had their children to worry about, their homes and livelihoods. “Yes,” said many mouths, “it might have been great, but what can I do to bring about such change? I am not willing to sacrifice what I have gained in hopes that I might live better. And besides, it will only work if everyone takes part. Read the papers, it would not have passed anyway.”

Time passed, as it always does, and the lives of most continued or found anew the cycles of routine. Bread was bought, shows were played and taxes came and went, and while people might complain, they never considered that life very well might be better not only for themselves but for everyone. It would take only to change.

III

The Lion lay with his head on his paws, a glaze over his eyes of static boredom. He had walked every footstep of his cage already unimaginable times since he had been returned to its confining spaces. He had dreamed unknown dreams, but always they were interrupted by some child screaming or some fool taunting him. His legs were always tight, not like when he could run, back along the streets and into the plains, glancing about, pausing, chasing unknown creatures, striking, eating them. The flesh was always better when it still beat as if alive, instead of the stale slabs he now ate. The wind was no longer quite so warm, the water no longer so sweet, sleep no longer so refreshing; nothing as enjoyable, interesting, as it was. These memories fade. And back he thinks into that time and wonders if indeed he had been free. No, that was just a dream.

BOOK TWO

Menagerie

There is no such thing as mankind.
There is no we, only perception, lives and dreams;
people attempting to conform the world picture
to their own thoughts and dreams.

A Sacrifice

Black eyed freedom sat on a funeral pyre, preaching of custom and loss; his hands yellow with disease, lips crackling like burning pinecones, the sap oozing forth in slow death. His tattered hair and disheveled cloth hung limp on his skeletal frame and vanished first before the torch.

Pot bellied greed laughed a deep laugh, as an arrogant man laughs when he has strangled a mouse or stamped out a revolution of starving men with an army of well fed, well armed, ignorance. He wore a regal ring on his plump finger, and as the pallbearers escorted the ashes from the land, they paused to kiss the gem, bowing low in obeisance before cheerfully continuing with their task.

Green eyed Mammon laughed too, clutching trembling democracy to his breast while he paraded goodwill shivering in its cage. He stood on the third world, and every time he squeezed his toes, a diamond came out, glistening in the sun with the sweat of a thousand 'lesser' men.

Humanity stood bound in a choke collar, his hand tightening the chain, his own blind sorrow ignored by his heart and his feet bound in the concrete shackles of ritual. Every time he tried to walk his swollen ankles lead in different directions and he fell blushing on his face. Sometimes he managed to walk in circles.

The ashes of freedom were spread in the badlands, but before the henchmen had scarce turned away, the wind gathered them in and carried them throughout the earth, scattering the small pieces in the hearts of men, wherein they would sometimes sprout and displace the poison roots of greed. Then a voice calling for the release of goodwill; a voice calling for self bound humanity to relinquish the bloody leash of usury; a voice ignored, tormented, slaughtered; a voice unbreakable; a voice of freedom.

Journey of a Requisite Man

there were footsteps
like octopi inkstain puddles
like typewriter knees
clicking repeatedly on a horse's thigh
yellow haired mistresses
dining with pale skinned wives
serving tea in beer mugs
and beer in tea cups
illegitimate youths suckling
on the tit of illegitimate breasts
that was at the tea shop
or was it the race track
they always feel the same

small horses riding large men
giant parcels on indentured backs
that was in another land
where eyes were different
where the elders rebelled
and the students drove tanks
like sloths
creeping along
there was a smell of spice
an aroma of war

a ragged man squatted on sidewalks
with a fire in his hand
watching the students
chase their forefathers
for some reason he laughed
a parliament grin
a capitol nod
he fried a fish on the lawn
and kicked over a wall
there was something unknown
hanging in the sky

The Sideways Lightning Bolt

Close your eyes. Do you see it?

The line of electricity. The sideways lightning bolt.

The afternoon special confession of a teenage mega star who never had a chance to be a child.

The football deathmatch of steroid men and hairless women.

The lie filled entourage escorting the politician's children and war criminal ex-affiliate to the character assassins' ball.

The black hating white man and white hating black man uniting to hate the mid colored Arab.

What are those lines that fill in the black spaces of light in your mind; that mimicry life and creep softly like a metaphor thief or tarantula queen? Is it the heart of conscience? The drowning spirit of mirth?

Perhaps it is just indigestion because, surely, the feeling of unease, the willowy tract of confusion, disillusioned faith in TV prophets and elected white warlords, cannot be anything but false.

Open your eyes. Do you still see it?

The line of electricity. The sideways lighting bolt. The televised programming of children and falsehood based patriotism. The wholesale pact of greed and democracy. The pricetag on God's head. The lazy eye of justice. The shackled hands of freedom.

Open your eyes.

Apple Leaves

Raindrops glistening on apple leaves have a peculiar smell of death. It was on such a day my dog died and left me alone to dream.

The witches and hobgoblins never seemed the same after that; they lost their reality and retreated into the world of Santa Claus, Jesus and the Easter Bunny; where Hercules and Jonah traded tales and Zeus arm-wrestled Thor for the crown of imagination. It was always cold when it rained.

Then the nightmares started, and I chased myself ragged at night, running from the fear of finding myself. I would drink a cup of tea every morning and take a shower before bed.

But the only fiend was myself; the only ghost my own. There was no creature in the shadows, only the inflammatory screams of my ignorance; binding, sorrowful. After breakfast it was always silent in the house, like we were all dead, like only the dog had ever lived.

Midnight Stroll

Screams of strangers resonate as I pass through empty midnight streets. Their anger makes me weep.

This is not the first time such tears have wet my cheeks; nay, they have fallen oft, for it seems there can be no peace amongst the community of man.

“Of what have you to weep?” A less affected mind may ask.

The most obvious is war. So adverse is this to life, yet it is not just death but the continual acceptance, and even joy, of the greatest manifestation of selfishness and hate.

Within its darkened confines images appear which simply should not be: a man joyous, dancing, as he grasps a fallen soldier’s severed head; a woman grievous, wailing, as she cradles her daughter’s body, bleeding, dead; a young boy smiling, waving, as he holds aloft a repeating rifle, cocked, the bullets fed. Need more I mention the countless scenes by which mankind continually drives himself from peace?

“Yes, but these are strangers.” The inquisitor may reply.

They are life. Their suffering afflicts the communal joy.

“There is no such thing.”

Why then do I feel down when I hear a child crying or when a room of people sit awkwardly, unspeaking? What is it that lifts me up when I hear innocent laughter or when lovers’ pass, eyes asparkle, gleaming?

Tell my heart not to feel pity as it observes a wolf pace in its prison cage, whining, wearing itself away because it has been robbed of freedom. Tell me there is not a metaphor in that beast for the way mankind should be.

But man has long ceased to pace, much like the rotund grizzly in the adjacent cage. The eyes of this beast are dumb for it found it easier to be blind and eat the proffered fruit than to walk the true path of life.

Yes, there is a connection among all creatures. The feelings of all life affect each individual soul.

That strange uneasiness which comes seemingly out of place; were your eyes open you would see it flows from the unhappy anger of your neighbor.

The true soul shudders at words of judgment and idle talk of greed. It drives out the voice of derision and ignores eloquent deceit. Peace, truth and happiness sustain it and instill within a genuine belief in the beauty of life.

It, like the wolf, shall wither if caged for never will it forgo the truth and blindly accept as right all the things it knows are wrong.

At home I lay in blackness, attempting not to dream.

Last time, I heard the mother scream.

Puppy Love

Why? Please tell me why you have taken my children, whom I nursed so lovingly and never once did mistreat, and divided them to live long lonely lives. Was it too much to let us grow close or be a family?

What would you, human being, feel if I stole your pup while still it suckled from your breast and locked it in a shed except at odd times I let it out to run? What if I put a collar around its neck and choked it to make it sit or abandoned it alone every day from eight 'til six?

Look into my eyes and tell me I do not feel longing for my sons and daughters in your homes; tell me that I am blind to love and do not recognize the distant yelp. Tell me, thief, that it is not my broken heart beating in my veins.

On a Bridge

He stood at the middle of the bridge, gazing now at the empty, gray, waters below, now at the empty, gray, clouds above and said softly to himself, "I want to fall in love."

He then walked on and dropped a broken heart through his fingers as if it was a handful of sand, each grain lifting with the wind to swirl about the sky until it fell softly like a seed in some stranger's eye.

Most places they fell were barren, while occasionally one would take root and begin to grow a thought before passing with the changing season of the ever mobile human life.

But someday, the seed of love might find fertile soil and sprout forth in bounteous feelings of mutual admiration, thus answering his quiet plea to the ears of nature on the chill and stormy day he passed across the empty bridge and his thoughts struck on the most happy memories of a life he had yet to live. Someday.

An Evening

With vacant eyes, as if dead, she stared at me, but there was, in the recesses, a sense of rationale.

“Good evening,” said I to her, but in return she spoke in tongue, far foreign from my ear.

On and on she went, unimpeded by my ignorance, so I nodded, smiled and danced with her, and at the evening’s quiet end, she kissed me soft upon my cheek, and whispered gently in my ear, “thank you.”

Feathers

her fingers trace
the weak spot
at the back of my knee
it is unbearable
divine
I close my eyes
and feel alive

we met
in a rainstorm
of feathers
obstacles of secrets
dissolved
by crescendoing laughter
as we danced unknown
and cried

three words were spoken
the rest exchanged
in lustful eyes
and mirthful lips
upturned
teeth licked
navels felt
rising
the smell of flowers
the scent of freedom
between
superfluous angels

Faithless

“Suffering,” she said, “is a lie; a magic dragon created of dandelions and downy white geese.” It made me wonder why she cried.

“Hate,” she said, “is preposterous; a misinterpretation of bad lessons and overzealous parentage; a green eyed gazelle prancing across a field of warped thoughts and forgotten ideals.”

“Love,” she said lastly, “is a chimera; a dream fluttering from one generation into the collected fantasies of the next; no one has known it; it does not exist.” I understood why she cried.

Now She Knows

As a child she always wondered why the stars did not fall upon her as she stood unwatching in the midnight cornstalk fields and danced with raccoons she never did quite see.

She wondered, also, why the trees never spoke, because she was sure she saw mouths in the gnarled cracks along their coats while she skipped through the falling leaves to the shallow swimming hole where she swam naked and wondered why people ever began to wear clothes.

Now she knows these things as she sits in her office and stares at a vibrating screen, never looking out the window at the birds or billowing clouds, never dancing or laughing, never dreaming or seeing raccoon shadows.

Now that she knows, she never looks at the sky, never considers the stars or the freedom of nakedness. And she looks at her daughter and wonders what nonsense the child is thinking as she sits at the window watching and giggles at a stray dog sniffing along. And she thinks of her own youth and wonders if she ever was so ridiculous or happy; if she ever laughed at such things or wanted to play in the rain.

March 3rd

From her tender eyes slid teardrops wet upon my chest as she buried her cheeks in sadness and clutched me with shaking arms. I wrapped my own around her, comforting, and recalled a time I hid my face in a giant's cloth and wept away my fears.

The warmth I remember of feeling safe. The sense that here, if nowhere else, I was important and I was loved. That I could cry my heart out and no one would tell me to stop. No, these arms would hold me close until I no longer cared to be. Then, when I looked up, I would find eyes soft and a smile.

I think she cried herself to sleep in my arms, and later I drifted off, conscious of her heartbeat so near my own, a feeling of completeness I never sought or expected to know.

An Hour Before Dusk

The light of day is dwindling, yet in these final hours it is most beautifully reflected upon the world. A little richer are the hues waving in the sea. A little stronger are the shadows which offset the gleaming rays.

Birds alight as if to say, “This is the time for love; for merriment and play. Run beneath our gentle wings amongst the fields a gleam; run, child of man, unleash your burdened innocence and spring forth with glee. Observe the majestic glowing sun as it nestles amongst the clouds; witness here on earth, All that is to come.”

Red, orange, green and blue; before these were just words, but now they are imprinted on your soul as messengers from another world for, surely, the image before your eyes cannot be real; it is too beautiful, perfect.

And so, assuredly, it is, but lest time did cease could any man maintain to look upon it, for as the sun dips below the waiting sea, the colors fade gradually to gray. But have faith, o broken heart; tomorrow shall again the grandeur rise and in the eve shall the birds once more dance by.

Relaxation

relax
breathe deep the calm
breeze
palm trees
the soft rhythm of water
falling
eyes closing
heart rhythmically subdued

drift
into a place
empty
fond
where flowers bloom
and hummingbirds dart

rise
above yourself
above the earth
so far
the world is pure

watch
the birds
feel their wings
in your shoulders
freedom
peace of mind
relaxation

that I might feel so
all the time

The Heart of Innocence

The child stood weeping, her small hands wrapped within themselves as if she was set to recite a poem or passage from the bible. Her green eyes were sad, lined black with passing time and lost faith in miracles. Her feet were bare, cracked by the tidal waters of her tears and the soft wind which blew in spurts like the breath of some distant titan sleeping, his heart calm with the irrepressible peace of dream. She seemed to shiver, her youthful body quaking with the fragility of an elderly frame upon which death has begun to wear. But there was a smile in her lips, refreshing, pure; a ray of love peaking out from the cloudy face of unwanted realization that in the scene played before her eyes there was an overwhelming lack of grace.

A stranger stepped from the shadows and knelt in the puddle of tears, gazing with wonder upon the changing seasons of the child's face.

“What is wrong?” Asked he with sympathetic voice, the words dropping gently into the air like wisps of dandelion disengaged. His mouth was a smile of ivory sugar cubes; his lips glistened with the wisdom of adulthood.

She, at first, did not answer, but her eyes lighted with dismay and soft pity. Then she spake, the syllables forming after they left her mouth; her tongue unmoved by the ignorance of childhood the stranger had condescended to expect.

“Anger.” Said she. “Rage.” Said she. “The material heart of man, and the empty lessons of previous generations which children mimicry and come to teach as right. The black heart of deception, the envious tongue of desire and the bleak obedience of war. The whitewashed walls of nations which stretch their vagrant roots around the earth in the name of progress, commerce and half hidden, vehement, precocious greed. Shall I state more?”

“Quite the child.” The stranger said with superior, uncomfortable, laughter as he stood and looked about for the parents of this child whom seemed quite out of line with everything he expected a child to be. He patted her on the head and scurried once more into the shadows where everything, and everyone, acted with propriety and the feigned respectability of age. A second man soon took his place and overlooked the unchanging variance of the child's face.

“Why do you weep?” He asked, his lips pursed in exaggerated silence.

“Because the footsteps of time,” she answered, “have led humanity to a point, this moment, from which it cannot help but refute itself and bathe in hypocrisy. Because children are taught to hate, as well as the dirty ways of deceit, and adults attempt to live in a world in which they never were children. Because anger spreads like a disease and arrogance, sin and idolatry, of both men and the false gods of wealth, fame and war, are commonplace, acceptable and paraded about as if mankind has never had the potential to rise above them. Because mankind never will rise above them and peace is an illusion, a desperate dream. Because a great many souls live without hope and many more live without joy. Because men die for reasons other than death and live for reasons other than life. Because in your heart is the belief that you are more important than anyone else.”

The man sat beside the child, a look on his face of consideration, of new thoughts falling like sideways raindrops in a midnight storm. He crossed his legs, his arms, his preconceptions. Then, in much simpler voice, he asked the child, “why then do you smile?”

“Because I have hope;” she answered, “hope in eternity and grace. Faith in the feelings spiraling within my soul which innocently promise goodness and life. Faith in joy and the sparkling renewal of love. Because in my heart peace reigns uninfluenced by any of the things which elicit my tears. Because I have seen the true smile of a child, of a man, a woman, a soul; I have witnessed the potential of life and dreamed the dream of heaven. Because I have faith in life.”

The man was silent beside the weeping, smiling, child and for a time remained immersed in the light radiating from her presence which cast gentle rays into the darkness of the world. Then he slid from the luminescence, glancing up with one final question before she vanished from his sight and his eyes reopened to the general struggles of every day life.

She, with a whisper, answered, “My name is Truth.”

Whispers from the Mind of God

I stood on the edge of time, peering into the abyss from whence the world sprang, considering the bleak shadows and waves of effervescent light which swirled timelessly in the Mind of God.

Such whispers did I hear; of things beyond the commonplace and the soliloquies of man; of histories and futures, worlds dead and yet created; of individuals of enduring grace, as well as black secrets of things that should have never been.

Then there was confusion; a thousand tongues at once shouting unknown prayers and curses. Then there was one voice, and it spoke as if wounded the single word, "Forsaken."

Then images appeared within the chaos. At first there was a lion napping beneath a thorny tree, yawning, smiling in a way. Then arrived a man, and he with spear did pierce the sleeping creature's hide. Uprose the lion silently, glancing upon his wound, and then unto the man, he spoke, "When, in future times, the last of my kind does fall beneath the burden of your industry, know that your end has come." He then lay down to death, but the man, bitter at its prophecy, again lay spear within his breast.

The vision faded but was soon replaced by a city; a splendid place of gold and light. It spread around me. The streets bustled with business; slave traders and charlatans.

A gavel sounded. Silence. A rotund man in a powdered wig arose from out the masses, smiling, and spoke in deep baritone of great benefits to the multitude if only they took this man, a pale creature uprisen on a pedestal, and drowned him with what stones they might find at their feet.

The first struck beneath his knee, but scarce time had he to know the pain before a thousand others buried him, and yet still they tossed more upon the heap until the gavel at last brought peace.

"What crime," asked I of a man near unto me, "has this poor soul committed to die as such?"

“What is that to me?” The answer came. “He was condemned by law and populace.”

“He was too unique.” A second answer came. “He would not believe the things they tell us they have found as right.”

Then they beat me. I do not know why, but I think because I asked the question and that there was pity in my eyes.

They left me. On the auction block stood a child, quivering, afraid. Above his head a sign read, “Innocent,” and amongst the crowd was a great fervor for it seemed the sight was strange.

A stone hit the child’s face. Laughter arose from the masses, and then the hailstorm unleashed, but the child would not fall. He stood only weeping, pity in his eyes, and then on his lips arose the words, “Forgive them.”

O horrendous sight; the child bloodied, cheeks raw with bruises, gashes; his torso bludgeoned, broken. Yet still he stood unwavering, as if a gargoyle haunting these wretched minds. Not yet, he seemed to say, shall innocence be washed away; never shall this life become entirely corrupt or the ways of sin be absolute; nay, for I am hope, and though I die, up shall rise another in my place; never shall the minions of hate disrupt the continuum of grace.

The bombardment ceased, and up the herald strode with sword of gold to wield down upon the child’s nape. There was an eerie calm. Then a flash of light. Everyone turned away.

Everything was gone except the child. He walked to me and smiled.

“Listen.”

There was silence. Then the distant sound of music, drawing near, swirling around, through, me. Suddenly I became aware of myself, as if my entire life I had been dead and only then been given life.

And such a beautiful existence; my body seemed fluid, pulsing with every breath, every heartbeat. I witnessed joy; gracefully it shrouded my eyes as upon my mind descended a heavenly voice from which every word was full of hope and the half veiled wisdom of eternity. With unblemished beauty did it describe the divine actuality of Grace, while with deep sorrow it retold the vast misfortunes of the earthbound human race. Of sacrifice it spoke earnestly; the words slow

and delicate but pure; uplifting in such a way that I could not help but feel saved. It spoke of dreams and instances in real life in which people thought or acted right. It discoursed on innocence and kindness; on humility, compassion and happiness. Of joy it spoke so convincingly that I, for a moment, imagined all humanity equally crowned with bliss. That I could recite the words, but such language lies beyond this earth.

Gradually the voice faded into the music, and I found myself awakening from a dream, aware for the first time of myself, of life and the grand existence of which this world is but the smallest part.

A Mirage and a Metaphor

The silhouette of a humpback whale rose above the horizon, while its song echoed through the waves which churned and tossed the meager vessel I found myself upon. The daylight waned; this I praised for the sun, the fiend, had burned me well and left my throat a swollen passage down which not a morsel had transgressed. My strength surrendered, my eyes shuttered dark and in the emptiness, the world began to spin. I seemed to be falling, floating, as if a tornado or whirlpool had taken up my raft and thrust my sickly soul into the whispering sky.

Then I was cold and, opening my eyes, found myself on an iceberg surrounded in a world of black and white. But it was strange. On my left a penguin paced, his head down as if in thought. To my right sat a polar bear, staring at the bird, amused.

“What place is this,” thought I then, while the penguin paced and the bear did grin, “that unites the poles in such small spheres that the world seems shrunk beneath my feet as if I am a god?”

As if my thoughts were words, the creatures in unison spoke, “You are far from God.” Otherwise, they varied not.

“What is this place?” I said out loud.

“A mirage.” Said the penguin.

“A metaphor.” Said the bear.

“You are to be judged,” spoke the bird, “upon your life.”

“Defend yourself.” Said the bear.

“How do I begin?” Said I. They did not respond. “I have tried to be good.” It seemed a poor defense. “And to please God. I have worked hard and kept to myself. I never began a fight. I rarely drink.” I was sputtering. How does one sum up a life? The ice was cold on my feet.

“I do not know,” I said reluctantly, “how to surmise my time; by what law, what determination, shall I be judged?”

“The Law.” Was all they said. We were silent. Then a streak of color formed upon the ice, and we three watched as it formed a child, a girl of eight, eyes radiant green against a skin of white; hair blonde, clothing blue, as if she wore the sky. She bowed her head and then spoke, glancing from left to right. Her words floated like beautiful whispers into my mind.

“Two men I saw,” said she, “yell at one another, words so cruel, vagrant. Their eyes raged, and then one man, he hit the other, and blood flowed from his cheek. I watched it spray and fall slowly to the ground wherein the men wrestled until the skull of one was broken and the other’s ribs were crushed. Such things they teach us as terrible and wrong, yet those words seem quite hollow when the actions resound so strong.”

The child raised her chin and in her soft eyes were tears which fell with silence as she began to age, transforming before my eyes first to a beautiful woman and then into an elderly sage.

“How time passes,” she again began, “like the stars across the night sky, except that we shall never see tomorrow or the next cloudy day for this life is not long enough to outlast anything but memories.”

And then she was gone. In her wake a flower sat; a fresh, colorful rose, but as I watched, it wilted and turned gray before vanishing in the ice.

I was overcome with weariness and soon found myself in dream. A great river was there, and it flowed into the mind of a poet, inspiring him, envisioning his pen with imagery of myths and nature. His faceless eyes were bright, and in his fantasy was a touch of the pure, unsacrificed truth, but it was so hidden that the words played differently with every mind.

Then there was a star dashing through the sky, a light descending upon the world, opening the eyes of mankind to kindness, but in their hearts it disappeared, reemerging only after centuries, confused and used as a tool of ignorance when in its life it was the greatest source of truth.

I awoke. The penguin had stopped walking, while the bear seemed to be sleeping. The bird stepped toward me, atop of me; he stood on my stomach and looked in my eyes. I saw my reflection in his pupils; my face had changed, older now, then almost ageless, as if I was every age at once. And in my mind feelings

arose from my past; days I had forgotten intermixed with the most often replayed moments of my life. I felt again like an innocent child, then, the moment next, as if I was dying, my bones weak, my age the last breath. It was as if my entire life was before my eyes, even the years I had yet to live; today, yesterday and tomorrow were one. Such diverse thoughts, contradictory feelings; the division of myself had never before been so apparent. Then nothing.

The penguin descended from my chest and continued his march. The bear continued to sleep, but to his rear another visage appeared, this an older man dressed in robes of another, ancient, time.

“Mourn not for me, yet I am gone,” said he, “that I have lived, I have enjoyed this gift of living. Weep no tear in my wake for was it not every day that I shed tears in joy and companionship? How we sat when we were young upon the river shore and listened to the silence and the great men talk. I recall the games of youth more than the journeys of my growing life; what whispers have I heard since then that my innocence was thus maintained? For in my dreams I remember not whether I was victorious but rather the pure enjoyment of sport.”

The old man was then a child, and ran he about the bear until he sat upon the beast whom uprose and raced about the berg in sheer joy, his tongue lagging out, his eyes smiling still, until he stopped and both voices said at once, “Why do you not run?”

And so I found myself in the most peculiar race against an aged man turned boy atop a giant bear while in contrast the penguin paced, his head down as if he did not hear the ruckus of laughter as the bear slipped and we three tumbled together across his path.

How I laughed, as if I too was a child. We lay on the ice, laughing, and I looked up into a cloudless sky. My mind drifted in that empty place of feeling when goodness uplifts the heart and the soul, so often hidden, reveals itself a little. Then a gunshot. I sat upright and discovered a new man, scowling, an awkward grin upon his face as a small trickle of smoke dissipated. Then I turned my head upon the penguin and found him dead, blood streaming from his small carcass, turning the entire iceberg a deathly red.

Tears I found upon my cheeks. The hunter began to laugh. The boy had disappeared, while the bear rose slowly to his feet, walked to the bleeding corpse and took it gently in his mouth. He tread softly upon the crimson ice towards the edge and dropped the fowl within the empty waters at our side. He said nothing and began to walk along the small path the penguin’s feet had worn.

I looked at the hunter. He now wore a soldier's uniform, and as my tears dried, he fell and lay looking upward at the sky, blood pouring from his chest that turned the ice black. I stood over him. His eyes were gray, stormy. He was dying, and on his lips formed a few syllables.

"The sky," said he, "reminds me of my childhood when I ran with my dog and laughed at the emptiness found in the light blue air." The eyes were then dead, and like the bear had the penguin, I gently bore him to the water and buried him.

My mind was tired of such rapid change so I began to tread my own footsteps along the side of the polar bear.

Rest." Said he after we had walked awhile, and I turned from him a bit and then sat, my legs outspread, my mind vacant while I softly smiled and watched the great bear pace.

The bear was sitting in front of me. I had not seen him move.

"What have you learned?" He asked, and then a crackling sound and we began to drift apart as the iceberg became two and the world appeared in the sea between. I was soon drowning, dipped beneath the waves as if cast off by the black ice. I struggled to the surface and reached out, grasping hold of the small raft I had before been abandoned on.

As I lay on that small vessel, rolling on the endless waves, the bear's last question echoed through my mind. What had I learned? Indeed, it seemed asked about my entire life, these countless years tossed about, changing, growing old, wondering, always wondering, how to live my life. How does a man sum up his life? How does he state what he has gained by living? Indeed, the thought arose whether we learn at all or merely pass this earthly time. Yes, we increase in worldly knowledge, but what of the Eternal? All we need to know of that, perhaps, flows already through our deepest being long before the moment we are born.

BOOK THREE

A Philosophical Turn

I have felt and believed many things in my life,
but beneath all has been the knowledge that I cannot know the truth;
that I can never know the reason, if any, for this existence or myself.

That Strange Disposition Sometimes Called a Soul

Where shall I seek God when His estates are barren and His voice is silent, misconstrued by all? What of goodness; shall I never witness its rosy cheeks spread across the waves of crashing humanity? Do I owe anything to society or should I simply fade into the innocent dreams which play so imaginatively behind my glowering eyes?

Questions beget not answers when asked with cynicism, and very few indeed are the words to cross my tongue which have not been spoken half in jest for there is within my mind the deepest voice which finds the path of this life of such low import it cannot help but impute mirth upon the grand and meaningless acts of man. But there are moments when this vagabond is touched, when the world appears aglow with beautiful life and the dour faces which pass so ignominiously seem to breathe eternity behind their eyes. It is then that the feeling of life is strong and thoughts of God vanish for even He is secondary to the purity of the momentary bliss.

It seems impossible to state with clarity the feelings of misuse which arise within when these eyes glance upon the world in toil, washing itself with deceitful war and hypocritical actions based on the most beautiful words. The soul weeps at the anger of nationalism and the passionate discipleship of religion. Tears engulf the sweet sunrise at the sight of crusades and political gamesmanship and what more at the pride men bear for the heartless, deceitful, actions which carry the world throughout its turns. There should be no passion but for life; for the happiness and beauty of all, but sadly the great Earth shall never be for the petty rulers of this world will never understand fully their true gifts and rise above themselves and prosper such as only perfection might imagine.

Sadly, the human race is ignorant, blind; it follows itself anywhere, regardless of pleasure or improvement in the general quality of life. Where joy does occur, never is it considered that this elation might be held without end. What condolence is it to a twenty-year-old mother that she remembers her wedding day so graciously when her husband has lost his life in war? Is the smile of a wife at the evening's close sufficient warmth to outweigh the stress found in an

hour commute, a twelve hour day and another commute? Has this man considered that the love he felt when he so joyously courted his wife might be known without end if he placed his own feeling above his static career? It is true that a majority of mankind seems incapable of considering true freedom, but might it simply be that no one has told them things could be better? But have not the words seeped through the ages that the worldly goals of wealth, power and fame are meaningless? But these messages have been all vague, impassionate poems and verses by recluses and radicals; lovers and outcasts condemning the society of everyone else as wrong but without accurate account of the steps toward that finer life of which they mystically speak. How can the words not be vague; the feelings of the soul predate the tongues of this earth.

Ah, yes, the rantings of a disenfranchised hypocrite; who has not said one thing, felt another and known yet a third? The unity of this life extends strong around the mind, holding the truth of things in a distant place which in too many minds has been completely erased by the nurturing spirit of the community of mankind which sees no purpose but to increase and feed itself.

A child is born; shall he even be allowed to dream before the world begins to crowd on him? The hands of the doctor; how unclean are they with misconceptions and false ideals? And what of the parents' minds; how shall they teach this child righteousness when not one day have they traversed in sight of it? This sour soul is drowned; the waterfalls of tears dry for indeed sadness cannot restrain the bountiful love which grasps so contentedly upon my dreams. The soul shall be forever two faced; joyous within itself, while tearful, dismayed, at the human life abounding, decayed. Yet every smile does well to make the waters bittersweet.

There shall be no dispute of the beauty of this life, only that mankind has turned his steps from it. He has mistaken the quest for self happiness with self interest and replaced self love with arrogance. The children of men are now born only that; the voice more pure has become muted, and in its place speaks only society. What chance does a child stand when he is raised in the false belief that his nation, religion or parentage is entirely right and those that belong to other divisions are invariably wrong? How shall he be objective in his thoughts when the history books are ignorant, patriotic, and conjecture is so often taken as fact? Poor child; your soul shall weep despite your ignorance of it.

That strange disposition sometimes called a soul, how wearily it clings to the fringes of this human life, promising more but without effect to the course of man; but forever shall it whisper into listening minds that there is a better life crowned with pure feeling and the euphoric search for Love and Eternity. Blessed be it; may the tears someday cease to fall.

On the Occasion of My Birth

My red hands open a door of indescribable unknown; a gateway to light; a place where there is chaos. I miss the comfort of the womb so I cry. I miss darkness, dream; I close my eyes. It does not destroy the noise of machines and unintelligible voices; the pain of inequality and strangeness, already overbearing upon my newly awakened mind.

There is a secret I cannot tell of the place I was before. There is a face I should not know that lives within my soul. There is a sense which fades; an emptiness which grows and swallows my recognition. I become a babe and know nothing of myself.

Then gradually it returns, the feeling of who I am, so that, by the time I die, I shall once more be complete.

The Nature of Myself

Sometimes I feel as if I have lost every part of who I have been, like I no longer should bear my name or find reflection in my face; that the edifice of change has long since erased the pertinence of who I am and risen a new stranger to whom I am a slave.

This burning human countenance, how I desire to wash you away and embrace the arms of true life; of existence without deceit or the falling sounds of pain in which the lowest moment rises precipitously above the most generous high.

What was I before the experiences of this life evolved the essence of my mind; before the shadows of faith fell completely before the rays of everlasting unknowing and I felt the hand of doubt ever so gently on my shoulder, like a warm friend, never desired or answered?

O' self, bear of the dark I find in the closing of my eyes; irrepressant, vigilant, self; down what road do you lead?

How far I have come, yet of wandering there shall be more.

It has not been suffice to lie in the midnight full moon, silent, still, while the paws of nature graced my sleepless head. It has not been enough to leap back at the serpent's strike as along the weary road I stumbled or to stand above the precipice with forehead blood upon my tongue and the dazed confusion of shock spiraling about my mind. Never could the deer's eyes or eagle's crest satisfy the craving for new life. Those weary steps of thirst, when in desert I almost fell; how could they ever be enough?

Nay, these things I remember, what little are they but journeys of the body revived by the recollections of the mind? That sound of hummingbird wings, the gentle shake of a young doe's ears while curiously we exchanged a look of most sentient grace; a look of innocent equality; a look of life; what mean these things if not the betterment of my soul, the building treasure trove of memory which uprisers the pillars of my heart forever upward to the realms of hope?

Prison

I, in prison, watching birds pluck worms from green grass, wondering if they realize they are more free than almost every man.

I, in prison, engaged in recollection of days which no longer seem the same and considerations of whether anyone is to blame for the incongruity of everything.

I, in prison, painting gray bars black, white walls green; trimming secrets from the edge of leaves.

I tread in circles over steps unknown, hoping in the future, when the walls are gone, that I might walk straight; to chase the moon; to trap a sunbeam or glint of silence; to weep, to sleep, at will.

Conversation between an Agnostic and a Mystic

- Mystic: Before we begin, let us lay down some ground rules. First, there will be no quotations, either from the Bible or any other source. I think we both understand the potential fallacy of such works and the fact that every person to ever live has known little of the truth.
- Agnostic: Agreed. Secondly, we must speak with complete sincerity and openness of mind.
- Mystic: Certainly, and likewise must we allow each other complete support in forming our arguments and conjectures for I believe we are both here in pursuit of the same truth.
- Agnostic: Yes, and lastly, semantics may not be used as an argument, in as much as the inability to comprehend a word or idea cannot be used a defense against it.
- Mystic: I believe I understand. If, for example, one of us used the word infinity, it would not be an acceptable argument to say that infinity is incomprehensible to the human mind. That we cannot fully conceptualize the term does not mean that it does not exist. It is as using the term sunset to a man blind from birth. He knows what the word means, but he does not comprehend the word such as you and I for he has never witnessed the sight; he has never felt the meaning of that word. Such is the word infinity to all human beings; we may describe it, but we cannot comprehend and feel its meaning.
- Agnostic: You understand completely, and this leads directly to the place I believe we should begin. Namely, the definition of truth.
- Mystic: Please, proceed.

- Agnostic: Simply, truth is what has actually happened, what is actually happening and what will actually happen, unattached to any perception, feeling or belief.
- Mystic: Surely you do not confine truth to action.
- Agnostic: What else is there?
- Mystic: Thought, dream, inaction.
- Agnostic: Define thought.
- Mystic: The recognition by a being of itself and its own existence, as well as the means by which this being interacts mentally with that existence. Simply, consciousness, inclusive of the subconscious.
- Agnostic: Shall dreams be considered part of this consciousness?
- Mystic: Yes, as dreams are an interaction of the subconscious and conscious mind, they should be considered part of the all inclusive consciousness.
- Agnostic: As such, is it also part of the mental interaction of a being with its existence?
- Mystic: Yes, and no further do you need to proceed as I comprehend already that by using the word interact in describing thought, I have myself shown that consciousness happens and thus is held by your definition of truth.
- Agnostic: And inaction was your other example of something other than action, but in the word itself is the word action, and in this case, that seems sufficient to disregard it on the simple grounds that the opposite of action is in fact the lack of action which in the eyes of truth is still an observable quantity. That nothing happens may still be recorded as in the same sense as if something happens. Agreed?
- Mystic: Yes, but I feel necessary to address feeling in regards to this. I would think it differs little in general with consciousness as to being an interaction of a being with existence.
- Agnostic: You then separate consciousness and feeling?

- Mystic: Yes, or perhaps rather thought and feeling. Consciousness may contain both, but while this topic interests me greatly, I believe it should be put off until we conclude defining truth. What you have said is correct, but as we have included consciousness within the record of actuality that is truth, I would appreciate a clarification as to how you perceive it to be included for there are many possible variations which spring to mind.
- Agnostic: First, I must reiterate that truth is without perception, feeling or belief, but this does not mean that these things are not part of truth. What I mean is that there are true events, true thoughts, true dreams, true inaction and true feelings. These are the things that did happen, are happening or will happen. Consciousness, however, as we both know, rarely experiences or remembers the truth for by its thoughts, dreams and feelings it remakes its perception of the truth to its fancy. This does not change the truth but adds to it a new array of thoughts and feelings.
- Mystic: I believe I understand, and if I may, I will give an example to clarify what you have said, at least as I understood your words.
- Agnostic: As you please.
- Mystic: I shall for an example use a dream. Let us say that a man, deep in the middle of the night, dreams that he is flying over the ocean. This is the true dream, yet as he awakens, he vaguely remembers the feeling of movement and that there was water. When he is fully awake he believes he was sailing across a lake. This perception is his true perception of the dream, but the true dream is unchanged. Thus, we have come to realize that truth is of an incomprehensible magnitude. Every thought, while it may error as to its recognition of the truth as to what it considers, is itself a true thought, as in the fact that it is the thought actually being thought. The entirety of truth is the sum of all action, thought, dream, perception and feeling, as well as the lack of these things. And here, unless you have any objection, it seems we have arrived at a logical place to discuss omniscience.
- Agnostic: Yes, though we could discuss truth without end, I agree that we both understand, for the purposes of this discussion, what it is. As for omniscience, I assume you refer to the belief that a being,

usually referred to as God, exists with absolute knowledge; in other words, privy to the absolute truth as we have described.

Mystic: That is indeed what I refer to, and while I understand that in no way can we arrive at the truth of whether God exists, we may at least realize the awesome mind an omniscient being would possess. As we have defined truth, the being would know everything that has happened and all that is happening, including every thought, dream, perception and feeling of every other being that has existed or now exists. This being would know absolute right and wrong, if there are such things. It would know the beginning of existence, if there was a beginning. And based on the infinite extent of its knowledge, it would with fair certainty be able to deduce the future, if this being exists in such a way that there is a future. Knowledgeable of all, such a being would know perfection, but I ask, does being knowledgeable of perfection necessarily dictate that this being would be perfect?

Agnostic: First, it must be stated what perfection is. If we consider our definition of truth, I believe it best to define perfection as errorless action; action again inclusive of thought and the other varying aspects we have previously mentioned. But perfection presupposes an absolute right and wrong, which, as you mentioned, may not exist. But having said this, let us, for the purposes of answering your question, assume there is an absolute correct way to exist and that our omniscient being, knowing all, is aware of what this perfection consists. The answer, thus, seems easy enough at first. That the being knows how to be perfect does not necessitate that he will be perfect. It is as a man that creates a budget to remove himself from debt. He knows he must pay a certain amount each month to each creditor for so many years without incurring any more debt or taking money from his debt payments to purchase new things. He is knowledgeable of what it will take to make himself without debt, but this does not mean that he will ever become debt free. He may remain true to his plan for a few months and then change his mind. He may forget to send a payment, despite his previous fervor to be true to his desire to become debt free. He desires to be without debt, he knows how to be without debt, but this still does not mean that he will be. And while to compare perfection with such a base human institution seems absurd, it illustrates well the point. However, on deeper look, the omniscient mind must also know the ill consequences for being less than perfect, if there be any, which

there must be in order for perfection to be a worthwhile task for this mind to attempt to attain. If there is no ill consequence for this being not becoming perfect, then it must be considered whether there is a benefit in becoming perfect. In terms of us as humans; what makes us do something that has no ill consequence if we do not do it?

Mystic: If it is enjoyable or to do it is simply easier than not doing it.

Agnostic: Thank you; I had overlooked that perfection might simply be the easiest way to live, and thus the omniscient being would arrive at perfection for simply that reason. But, I believe, that is simple enough that it needs no further explanation.

Mystic: Yes, but before we regard happiness, as that seems where we are headed, I must mention a point you have at least twice hinted at. That being the fact in describing a being cognizant of all truth, we cannot help but ascribe human traits at times to it for the simple fact that this existence is all we know. More so I bring to your attention the fact that in saying that the omniscient being knows truth, it must also know the truth of itself. What makes a man fail to remain with a budget?

Agnostic: That it makes him live differently than he has or would like to.

Mystic: Custom and pleasure. Now, let me first mention something that I just realized; the fact that ill consequence, as you called it, and benefit are the same thing, just as before inaction fell under action. At the same time, I must also remove the idea of something being simply easier. This also is part of consequence. Consider what makes something seem easy. It is the lack of challenge or resistance, which are merely forms of consequence. To sit is easier than to stand; why?

Agnostic: Because the body can relax more, a good consequence, and tires less easily, the avoidance of a bad consequence. I see your point, but I must remind you that many things are done irregardless of consequence, even if it is previously known what that consequence will be.

Mystic: Yes, we have reached an odd juncture. We have strayed from the topic, but let me breach one more point, and then, perhaps, we can clarify where exactly we have arrived at, if anywhere.

Agnostic: Proceed.

Mystic: Well, what I have been thinking is that we may have been wrong in grouping thought, feeling and action all together. Consider the fact that thoughts arise within the mind of various, unrelated concepts. While I still agree that a thought in and of itself is an action; I do not know. I guess in the conversation of consequence these things become clouded. Surely some thoughts and actions take place without regard to consequence. Yes, something will happen in reaction to something else, but is everything itself a reaction to something else? Is it not true that some things just are?

Agnostic: At first I say no, but I fully believe that this may change. Let us use the concept of a thought arising seemingly from nowhere. Forgive me, let me first split thought into three categories; memory, reason and dream. Reason, obviously is a reaction to stimuli. If I want to figure a math problem, I reason it out. If I want to refute a statement, it is reason that aligns my words. It is used in categorizing, figuring and operating, as well as other thought processes by which logic and rational are used. For thoughts of reason to arise a problem must first be presented. It may be of the concrete or abstract form, but always will there be something to be solved. Will I be hurt if I jump from this ledge? Moving at this speed, will I reach my destination on time? Why was I born? Is there a God? Both the conscious and subconscious use reason to solve problems, or at least attempt to solve them. These thoughts will not arise without stimuli.

Mystic: I believe in showing this you have convinced me that all three types are reactions, but please, continue.

Agnostic: Moving to memory. This also is a reaction to stimuli, although in a different manner than reason. Memory does not attempt to solve anything; it merely recalls, whether correctly or incorrectly, a moment or thought from the past. Obvious examples are the smell of the ocean recalling a time spent at the beach or a photograph causing the recollection of the time depicted. Less obvious are the memories which seem to arise without reason. These appear unattached only to the conscious mind. You, consciously, may not have noticed the apple core on the side of the road as you drove past, but the subconscious did, and after a series of recollections; first of eating an apple, then a time you

shared an apple with your sister, then a happy memory of your sister; your subconscious delivers to your conscious mind, minutes after passing the apple core, with no connection to any of your previous conscious thoughts, the fact that it has been some time since you spoke with your sister and how much you would like to see her. Is that clear enough?

Mystic: Yes, I believe so.

Agnostic: And little need I say of a dream, except to further separate it into two types. The first is a consideration of the future, which arises, in both ways, like memory. Seeing a dog makes a man think that he would like a dog. Such things are simple dreams of what the future might be, irregardless of whether any steps are taken to make it true or it is even possible to become true. The second type of dream is the type of which we spoke earlier, when the man flew over the ocean. These are a mix of reason, simple dream and memory. Yes, the dream has the symbology of freedom, but from where does it arise? Obviously, this man, like every other, either consciously or subconsciously, has observed a bird and considered the freedom of the beast. Events of censure or conformity in life lead to the desire for freedom, whether or not the conscious mind recognizes it. The imagery is supplied by memory, which amazingly can create many scenes and faces a person has never observed by piecing together a grand many things they have witnessed. This is imagination. It uses reason to arrange pieces of memories to create things that have never been and will never be. Thus, I believe it has been shown that all types of thoughts are a result of some sort of stimuli, whether outside the body or within.

Mystic: Yes, but what of the first thought?

Agnostic: Likely there is first an observation or feeling, then the thought considering or recognizing this. The second thought would be built on the first, as the third on the second, and so forth until we have had so many thoughts to create memories to be recalled and dreams to be imagined.

Mystic: Thus, thought does not come about without external stimuli?

Agnostic: Not necessarily. As said, a feeling may come first which may be either internal or external.

Mystic: But is not a feeling a thought?

Agnostic: Is your empty stomach a thought?

Mystic: No, but what of happiness?

Agnostic: This is a good question; is there a feeling of happiness other than the perception that things are good?

Mystic: Based upon my own experience, I must say yes. There are feelings that are not thoughts, just as there are thoughts that are not feelings.

Agnostic: But the recognition of this feeling is a thought.

Mystic: And thus we have arrived where we began, when you stated the first thought of a person is their perception of a feeling or of external stimuli.

Agnostic: Yes.

Mystic: Should this not be called life; the moment that first thought blossoms as a result of a feeling or other stimuli?

Agnostic: I would agree; or is it rather consciousness?

Mystic: I do not follow.

Agnostic: Does a dog think?

Mystic: To some extent, but not as a man.

Agnostic: Apologies. Let me ask first; does a dog feel?

Mystic: From what I have observed, yes.

Agnostic: Does he consider his feelings?

Mystic: I do not know. He seeks pleasure. He attempts to avoid pain. He enjoys company and seems sad when he is alone, unless he is of a solitary personality. Honestly, I would say he has reason, memory and even simple dream, but he is without imagination.

- Agnostic: Yes, I see your point. He has memory, in that he recalls his fellow dogs and where to get his meal. He has reason, in the sense that he navigates a trail or stalks his prey. Simple dreams, however, I cannot form an example.
- Mystic: Perhaps he has merely anticipation, which is the simplest form of hope. When he recognizes a friend at a distance, he wags his tail and runs joyful toward him. When a bone is on the table, he looks at it, hoping to soon be enjoying it.
- Agnostic: Yes, but unless you can think of an example, the dog is without long term dreams, as, perhaps, he is without long term memory, although I can consider no way of verifying the latter.
- Mystic: I would mention only the observation of a dog running in its sleep. He may be recalling a time he ran, and even the oldest, most feeble, dogs may have these dreams.
- Agnostic: Yes, but to return to the consideration of whether the first thought of a person, in the wake of the first feeling, should be called life or consciousness. After the discussion of the dog, how do you answer?
- Mystic: Still that it is the beginning of life. I do not consider a dog conscious of itself, yet we have shown that it thinks, and thus, it too had a first thought, the beginning of life.
- Agnostic: What of a tree? It is alive, but it does not think.
- Mystic: It acts.
- Agnostic: How so?
- Mystic: It grows.
- Agnostic: So does a stalactite.
- Mystic: Yes, but it is merely a mineral buildup; a reaction to moisture.
- Agnostic: As is a tree a reaction to a seed, minerals in water, soil and sunlight.

Mystic: And a person is a reaction to an egg, sperm and the minerals supplied in food.

Agnostic: Then action alone does not make life.

Mystic: But we have already shown that thought, as well as feeling, is part of action.

Agnostic: I suppose they are all reactions. As no thought comes from itself, it seems no action may arise alone. The stalactite is formed by the minerals in the water which drips along the ceiling of the cave. The water drains from the surface of the ground, where it picks up the minerals, which it reached by falling from the sky. The water reached the sky as it perspired from a man, who received the water he perspired from the mineral stream which runs from out the cave. Both the stalactite and the man are grown by the minerals found in the water, drained through the ground. The minerals arrive in the ground when the man is buried and the cave collapses to crush the stalactite. It is all reaction. It is all cyclical. There is the same amount of everything that ever there was.

Mystic: Yes, interesting, but; no, let me first illustrate my question more simply. Imagine we are sitting in a diner. On the table is a peppershaker. How did it come to be on the table?

Agnostic: The busboy or waiter.

Mystic: As a reaction?

Agnostic: Yes.

Mystic: It did not appear out of nowhere?

Agnostic: Things do not appear out of nowhere, as we have shown; everything is a reaction.

Mystic: Now, perhaps, you have guessed my next question. You stated that there is the same amount of everything as ever there has been.

Agnostic: Yes.

Mystic: Everything we are; everything we think is merely a reaction; the motion of things rather than the creation of things.

Agnostic: Yes.

Mystic: Where then did everything come from? Remember, you said things do not appear out of nowhere.

Agnostic: Perhaps everything has simply always been.

Mystic: But what of action. You said everything is a reaction, but for there to be a reaction, there must be first an action. If everything has always been, and at a time there was no action, from where did the first action arise to create all these reactions?

Agnostic: It would seem that, such as there was a hand to set the peppershaker on the table, there was a hand to set in motion the seemingly endless line of actions which have taken place since.

Mystic: But what set that hand in motion; is this not also a reaction?

Agnostic: Yes, it is. Can there be action without previous action? In all we have said, it seems implausible, but without an original action, there is nothing upon which to build the rest. Thus, action must have always been. But how can that be?

Mystic: But there is no action, only reaction. Thus, it should be asked; how can there have always been reaction?

Agnostic: Either way, we are left with no beginning. Thus everything, in some form, has always been and will likely always be for nothing truly is destroyed, only changed.

Mystic: And there will always be and has always been action, or reaction. Thus, existence is constant change, without beginning or end.

Agnostic: Or perhaps a cycle or loop.

Mystic: This implies repetition, which seems unlikely. It is illogical that the infinite reactions taking place would return upon themselves.

Agnostic: Perhaps I cannot use one word to describe the idea forming in my mind. Let me first describe the manner in which I have for some time considered the universe. I think it will help you conceptualize

what I mean by a loop or cycle without repetition, or at least without complete repetition.

Mystic: Please, proceed.

Agnostic: Consider yourself standing in the center of a cube without walls. When you put your hand out to the right, it reenters from the left, as on a globe if you could reach about the circumference you would reach yourself. Likewise, if you reach to the left, your hand returns from the right. If you reach up, it ascends from below. In any direction you reach, your hand reenters opposite. Thus, applying such a concept to the universe; in any vector you proceed from earth, you would eventually arrive back at earth. I suppose it is best called a four dimensional globe, as in a three dimensional globe you may go up or down to escape the surface. The universe, as seen as such, has no surface; no exterior to reach. Consider time likewise. Travel long enough along it, and you find yourself back where you began. This does not mean, however, that your surroundings will be the same, such as if one was to circle the earth. Upon returning to the identical location, everything may have changed. Thoughts are different. People, things, have moved. Action does not repeat, but time and space do.

Mystic: I attempt to conceptualize the idea, and it is beyond me, but as we stated at the beginning, this should not hinder the argument for, though it is beyond the human mind, this does not preclude it from being true. What I do imagine, however, is the box you spoke of and my left hand reaching to the left to take hold of my right hand on the right. I look to the left and see the back of my own head. I look up and see the bottom of my feet. It reminds me of the endless reflections of two mirrors.

Agnostic: Yes, many times has this image reigned just beyond my mind. I can state the concept, but as you said earlier of infinity, I cannot feel or know it, as the blind man cannot envision a sunset.

Mystic: Yes, and as we have arrived at a consideration of the infinite, let us proceed along that line of thought. I shall begin, if you agree, by asking the question, where is the center of the universe?

Agnostic: I would say that there is none.

- Mystic: Or, perhaps, every point is the center of its own universe. Let us begin with a single particle, the most minute, sizeless, particle of reality there is, smaller than anything that has yet been discovered. Consider this point at the center of a sphere not too dissimilar to the one you previously described, except that at any given vector, the universe extends infinitely from this point, never reaching a surface or repeating upon itself. And this holds true on any of the infinite vectors radiating from this point. Thus every point is the center of the universe, or rather there is no one universe but an infinite number of universes overlapping but nonetheless distinct.
- Agnostic: And thus, from the perspective of even the most infinitesimal particle of reality, the universe is unique and thus everything is relative to this perspective.
- Mystic: Yes. It is as two eyes looking at an object. They shall never see exactly the same image for they cannot look from the same place at the same time. No two things, of any scale, can occupy the same place at the same time.
- Agnostic: But if that held true, would there even be time? Of course there is to us, but at the base level, would time exist?
- Mystic: Yes. Time is merely a measurement of change, and thus each of the infinite points of reality has its own time, as each point changes uniquely. Yet, if these particles had consciousness, to themselves, they would not seem to change; it would appear that everything else was changing about them. It as grains of sand shifting about each other. In truth all grains shift, but to any individual grain, it appears to itself to be unmoving.
- Agnostic: Such as mankind believed for so long that the earth was static while the heavens swirled about it.
- Mystic: Exactly, but yet, if the universe is indeed infinite from any point, the earth is the center of the universe as well as any other. Or at least from a certain number of the infinite universes that radiate from the infinite points of reality. It as you and I, standing here. We are both an equal distance from ourselves were we to circumvent the globe, but we are not in the same place. Our universes, though different, are similar enough that we can communicate to each other a fairly accurate picture of what we see where we are. This is how the concept of time, not as simply

change but the measurement of mankind, has arisen. To everyone on earth, the sun is relatively identical. To each of us, the earth is relatively the same, but at any given moment, we are all in some place and our perception of things is different. In that sense, there is no time. Everything is present. Yes, we have come from somewhere, we will go somewhere, but at any moment, we are in one place. This is true of people, of planets, atoms; anything.

Agnostic: Yet one cannot deny the passage of time, or the predictability of events within it. If I throw a rock, it travels along a set path, based, yes, upon factors of velocity, mass, gravity and such, but upon a path that can be foretold and retraced.

Mystic: Oh yes, we can tell the future in that regards, but what of the subatomic; do all such things operate as such?

Agnostic: One would assume so, as every step taken in that direction reveals adherence to such laws as all of Nature seems to run by.

Mystic: I agree, yet some things that do not operate according to any laws.

Agnostic: Of what do you mean?

Mystic: I mean anything that operates by free will.

Agnostic: But we still adhere to the laws of Nature.

Mystic: Yes, of course physically, but what of mentally? Yes, my arm will hang according to the law of gravity, but tell me, is there a formula to tell me why I just raised my arm?

Agnostic: Of course not. Though it is not impossible that one exists. After all, you lifted your arm as a reaction to your own speech.

Mystic: Yes, yes, and our conversation has been merely a series of reactions, as our entire lives have been, but just because it is all reaction does not mean that this action is predetermined or predictable.

Agnostic: It is a question of whether every action is determined by specific stimuli or if there are multiple potential reactions to each stimulus. If there is only one potential reaction to every stimulus, then everything is predetermined and theoretically predictable if one

knows the stimuli. On the other hand, if there are multiple reactions to a specific stimulus, then we are left with the question of what makes something choose, or appear to choose, one reaction versus another. If I throw a rock directly at your center, will you dodge to the left or right?

Mystic: It would probably depend on many factors, some of which we could deduce, others we cannot. I might go to the right simply because that is my natural tendency, or perhaps the ground slopes slightly that way or my head was turned in that direction. Or, of course, I could choose not to move and let the rock hit me. Even this choice, however, could be theoretically determined if one knew enough information about what path I had taken up to that point in life. Honestly, though I do not like to say it, if we knew every contributing factor acting upon something at the instant it was introduced to a stimulus, we would be able to predict its reaction with certainty. Theoretically, also, this should be easier the less factors acting on a subject. Of course, in reality, there is at any moment such a vast number of interactions taking place, it would be impossible to predict with certainty whether I would go to the left or right or allow the rock to hit me. Thus, it would appear I made the choice. Additionally, to apply this to a human life in terms of fate; to accurately predict the course of one human life, one would need to know in advance the present location, momentum and vector of every particle of energy and matter in the entire universe. If one knew all this, then one could theoretically chart the cascading reactions of all these particles and bodies as they interact with each other and push the human life, or really the particles creating the human life, in whatever direction it appears to choose. This, of course, assumes that free will does not exist. But that question, along with the complex question of determination I briefly spoke of, seems unanswerable until consciousness is understood, in the sense of what makes the human mind? If it is indeed solely the brain, thought a series of chemical reactions and electrical impulses, then, though we seem to have choice due to the sheer complexity of the interacting forces and stimuli that act upon us, we are being driven by an unalterable, predetermined, path.

Agnostic: But, I sense, you consider the mind and brain as separate entities.

Mystic: I believe in the soul, and that it, in combination with the animal self of the brain, combine to make a human being. Of course, if

everything is predetermined, I believe this simply because the correct neurons fired in my brain to a stimulus somewhere along the line.

Agnostic: Yes, true. But as regards to the interaction of the soul and the brain, I have always considered that if it was possible to organize the many divisions found within an individual human being, they would all, or nearly all, fall under the two main divisions of brain and soul, or preferably inward and outward selves. When one uses the term soul it stirs a great many preconceived notions. I believe it is better to use the term inward self for soul, although it is virtually interchangeable. I would further add that it is probably easier to look at these selves in the terms in which they evolve for a man's journey through life may be considered as the amalgamation of the separate paths of evolution of the inward self and outward self. The journey of the inward self, as I mentioned, is of the soul. It seeks, by thought and action, to further its passage through time, perhaps eternally. It cares little of this human life, except as a means for observation, marvel and attainment of knowledge. Conversely, the outward self is of this world. It seeks success, happiness and camaraderie. Now, obviously, within these two divisions there are all the varying aspects which make us individuals. Both selves are influenced by environment, although the outward self much more so. Actually, the inward self may not be affected, merely how much influence it has upon a person's thoughts and actions. But that is a matter of the interplay between the two selves. Before we enter that territory; do you understand what I mean by the inward self and outward self, or am I being too vague?

Mystic: I believe I understand, but let me be sure. It is the inward self that wonders, "Why am I here?"

Agnostic: Yes.

Mystic: And the outward self that thinks, "I am hungry," "I feel lonely," or "I wonder if that person likes me?"

Agnostic: Yes.

Mystic: It is the outward self that dreams of worldly success, in whatever fashion those dreams take, and considers fame, desiring that in five thousand years its name may still be lauded as great. It draws

plans for the course of this life, for this temporary human life is the journey the outward self treads, beginning with the day of birth and ending with the day of death. The inward self, however, is on a journey upon which the beginning and end are hidden.

Agnostic: Very well said.

Mystic: And, to use a philosopher, as an example. His quest for knowledge, the questions he poses and experiences he seeks are of the inward self, while when he scrawls those thoughts upon a piece of paper and produces them to the world in the attempt to earn a living or gain fame, it becomes the realm of the outward self for the inward self is happy with the expansion of knowledge while the outward self seeks to be rewarded or lauded for having thought those thoughts.

Agnostic: Yes, and a very good example of how the two selves interplay with each other, although for most of us the interaction is not so obvious.

Mystic: How so? We all have our wonderings which are of little relevance to the earthly life. We all grow inwardly in spurts and moments. Yes, not everyone attempts to turn these thoughts into fame or immortality, but the thoughts must arise within every person, even if it is at rare times.

Agnostic: True. And though it may not have been your intention, I realize that human behavior cannot be divided into simply two categories. There must also be a third; the basic animal self.

Mystic: But does this not fall under the outward self?

Agnostic: No, I do not think so, especially as we have described it. The basic animal self is a thing of the present. It has little to do with the construction of hopes and dreams. It feels things. It has instinct. It does not fight, per se, with the outward or inward self; it overpowers them, or is overpowered by them. Part of the outward self's path is how much to gratify the basic animal self and the inward self, for these two, the animal and inward selves, are almost completely incompatible. At best they are indifferent of each other. It is irrelevant to the animal self whether the inward self exists. It thinks merely of satisfying its own wants and needs. The inward self, meanwhile, considers itself weighed down by the

animal self. If only, it thinks, the search for knowledge and continuum of thought did not have to be continuously interrupted by the animal needs of food, warmth, lust and sleep. The outward self, in all of this, attempts to balance the two and interact with the world at hand. The three, united, form a human being.

Mystic: I agree, except that I would not go so far as to say the inward self and animal self have nothing in common. They both are fond of leisure, as is the outward self, although it, in conforming to the world around it, is much more willing to take up the burden of work. The animal self would rather steal than work, while the soul desires freedom from all such burdens that hinder its enjoyment of existence and pursuit of wisdom.

Agnostic: I see your point, and it brings it to consideration the interaction of people in society. For those whom either the animal self or inward self is abnormally strong, it is difficult to be part of the society of man wherein the outward self is king. Of course, like all factors of personality, there are countless variations of the three combining to produce the many different types of people which exist.

Mystic: This raises a question in my mind, and while I realize we cannot know whether there is existence beyond death, let us for a moment suppose there is.

Agnostic: Agreed.

Mystic: My question is this: does a man, moving through death into the afterlife, retain his personality? We have divided his personality, in essence, into three forces which form the person he believes himself to be. How much of this whole remains with who he becomes? What prompts this question is the fact that so many of the iniquities of this world are bred into the personalities of men. If human memory is retained, so then it seems is the inequality of human life. Consider a man raised as a noble man, taught from birth that he is of better blood. This nobility establishes so much of his character, it is almost impossible to separate it from who he is. In death, will he believe himself still above those around him, especially when he sees among them men whom were peasants or slaves in his own life? And these men, having always been taught that they were lower; will they in death, when they see this noble

man still look down upon them, believe themselves still less and bow to his wishes as they did in life?

Agnostic: I will admit that such a consideration is new to me and, honestly, somewhat disparaging, for the afterlife most men seek, in which they retain the essence of who they have been, would, on the basis of what you have said, potentially become as hypocritical and abusive as the world in which we live. To give myself hope, I would begin with the inward self. It observes everything a man does. It has memory of the life a person has lived. In that noble man you spoke of that considered himself above others; no doubt his inward self, though deeply hidden, looked at all men and said, "These are my equals. We are all the same in the sense that we all have life and the ability to enjoy life." Yes, he may have owned slaves, even beat them, but there was in the depths of his heart a consideration, perhaps subconscious, that he had no right to do such a thing. This is the part of man that reads, "Love your neighbor as yourself," and believes it can be done; though who among us has? This is the portion of man that does not fear death. This is the part that abhors war and bigotry. This is the part that loves, not from fear of loneliness or physical attraction, but for the simple fact that in this kindred being exists also the beautiful life that breathes within itself. If man retains this upon traversing through the cascade of death; then all that is remembered of this life shall be the times of joy.

Mystic: Thus, you are saying that the soul would shed itself of both the worldly and animal selves but retain a sense of what this earthly existence has been

Agnostic: Yes, how else could what you have spoken of be prevented? Granted, given paradise in which to live, human society would be different, but given the history of mankind, I find it hard to believe it would be as grand as it could be.

Mystic: Now, perhaps, you understand what I mean when I use the word soul. It is that which you described; the good, divine within each of us. All that is base belongs to the animal and outward selves.

Agnostic: But surely they have their good qualities as well.

Mystic: They have qualities which help them through their path of existence, which we said earlier of the outward self, and I logically

apply to the animal self as well, was the human life we live here on earth, from death to birth. That a quality is helpful in this world, or even apparently good, does not mean it will be in the next world. Humanly beauty is a good example. It is very useful to both the animal and outward selves, but what is it beyond the gates of death? Nothing. The carcass of a queen rots the same as a mollusk.

Agnostic: Yet we live now, and thus, to a human being, the sum of three parts inseparable till death, qualities such as these are important.

Of Ancestry

Warrior blood of Scots and Norsemen, of French knights in quest of honor and English peasants of nation proud; American spendthrifts and vagabonds, soldiers, priests and blacksmiths, sailors; within my veins these thoughts remain and recall at vague moments the ancestry through which I have come into being.

I observe with distaste the modern wars and consider how grand it would be to stand amongst my clan, sword in fist, set to battle with all, to strike them down, to bleed anew and find pride in the scars and wounds.

The wandering seas call for conquest, but the world has become tame, the adventure, unknown, has gone and in its place reigns the contrite society which disintegrates the family battles and replaces them with imaginary woes and an automatic, unchaotic world where most men breathe and die without living and Romance has been destroyed.

Yes, it was a bloody life we savages led, but at least that life was pure and meaningful. How much more pride I should take to fend the gentle shepherd's herd from wolves and poachers; nightmares, devils; than to sit in any office or mine of industry. It is incomparable: rather would I be an ignorant peasant breaking the soil for my own benefit than to produce nothing so that I might drive home to my borrowed house and attempt to live like everyone else.

The wild blood of centuries flows deep within my very soul and calls at times for conquest, but alas, there is none.

Musings

Musing the First

War is wrong.

Why do you laugh at these words, call me naïve, ignorant?

I do not care that it has always been. I do not deny its existence, only its place in life. Have we not at least the drive to rise above our past and find peace?

Yes, you are right; man shall never change. Yet, this does not imply that war is okay. It does not erase the heart's pleading for innocent blood to remain in the young veins of life. It does not prevent the thought that mankind is capable of more, is capable of love.

Musing the Fourth

Anger has no place in my heart. I banish it; set it free to suffer the pain of ill-use and fall at the feet of joy; to beg love for a moment of release.

I shall deny it the entrance by which my emotions rise, ignore it until it evaporates and ceases to linger by, hoping to find me in my weakness and swell within my eyes.

Musing the Sixth

Label me not American. Take stock not that I am a man, that I am white, young; of European descent; agnostic; mystic; artist; poet. Remove these tags. I am but one thing. I am life.

Musing the Eighth

I live
because I have life.

I die
because I have life.

Of knowledge
I know naught else.

Musing the Tenth

I have no right to speak of suffering or the need for communal joy. I have no right to condemn anyone for inhumanity or lack of brotherhood. I have done nothing to help my fellow man. I have never known the ills of this world, except through the censored eyes of distance. I do not know pain. I do not know injustice. I speak of peace; I have not known war.

Musing the Twelfth

Give me the heart of a child so that I might know the variance of life which radiates from out my soul.

Instill me with appreciation for all existence no matter how grand or infinitely small.

Yield not, emerging self, to waves of doubt and thoughts of compromise when the goal is truth.

Cease not to dream the dream of love, no matter how distant at times it seems.

Rise Up Ye Accursed Dreams

How dearly the winds sweep across the earth, yet strike not oft enough upon the vanity of man. Blow on sweet breeze; carry off the rose by which knowledge had been learnt for these creatures which now rule earth will do no less than let the flower wilt. His thoughts are rotten, his wisdom false; lo to him for the crimes by which his hand hath condemned his soul to suffering.

Tears fall ceaselessly from Heaven for the child who has been lost in the unremittent flow of ignorance streaming through the consciousness he considers his greatest wealth. The wings of love have been cut off and replaced with the yoke of toil; sorrow has crept from within and eaten the joy of Truth. This life has become paramount when in truth it is but a passageway into the greater light; Then the foolishness of humanity shall be revealed, and every mind will be retrained to be capable of understanding. The voyage is merely a means to hasten the enlightenment. It means nothing in itself.

Storm clouds rising; the sanctuary of sin holds tight against the waves of Innocence which strike ever so gently upon the door. Desultory minds are chained in concrete bonds of irrelevant actions and coerced into throwing stones upon their former brethren. Kind men lose hope as the world piles strife ever upon their backs. Yet life, profound, flows still through the marrow of man and on unique occasions erupts upon the surface of a mind and ruptures the static mask which society casts upon freedom and deep consideration of Truth.

Memorization is false wisdom, a mere mummification of individuality which leaves the mind filled with irrelevance when in truth it could spread its wings and fly into the ethereal plains of hope and discover ingenious feelings which the common soul has yet to even dream.

Take flight free soul, spread forth your wings and drift away upon the wind into the large kingdom of your heart for there the sharp corners of humanity dissolve into potential existential love. Dive through the waves with abandon and cease not the wild thoughts society chastises and describes as aimless. Have you not the right to think thoughts so grand as God? Truth walks within Him, while we, simple beings, must seek and fall in its echoes.

Rise up ye accursed dreams and render yourselves useful at least to one true man; hear not the damnations flowing from the frothy mouths of men; take heed to remain unchanged lest ye become the accursed being these individuals claim.

What sin could you commit worse than to abandon yourself after having discovered peace, for is that not what mankind seeks? Or is this wretched war his pride for in it he is no longer apt to idleness and thus thought shall remain drowned within the abyss of ignorance? Better this war, however, than the droll complacency of repetition for at least death inspires faith and occasional thought.

But even war has been robbed of its natural course for these days machines account for widespread death, and these scraps of metal feel no pain; thus they could kill forever and no soldier would know the terror found within one's soul as he turns with boot the body of a man he has killed not three minutes prior in the mad rush of sabers in which he lodged his blade into the enemy's heart and looked into his eyes and found not an enemy but rather a man similar to him.

Shall no child be taught to fear the concept of the battlefield now that the veterans are dead that fought the great, accursed, wars and watched millions douse the lands with blood and tears?

Throw the history book into the flames and listen to the old man who in the jungle held in his hand the decapitated remains of his dearest friend; bottle the tears of those that starved and were burned to death; know the words of those that swam through the lake of fire instead of those that rewrote what they once read in a book; give the child emotion instead of fact for these feelings are more of Truth than the few lines which depict the dates and sways of war; teach not from the General's point of view but rather the private who crawled in the earth and smelt the blood upon his clothes; tell not of the President's appeal for kindness but of the man in the collapsed mine who ate rats for thirteen days before he was pulled out by men who put off sleep and petty concerns to save a fellow of their community, not for duty sake but from kindness; tell of the heart which wept for his lover's death, not of the poet who imagined he knew pain; set forth in motion a higher learning based on the principle that the past was wrong and the future potentially great.

Fly thou free soul and look not back lest thee be bound; ponder not the system of life but rather life itself; speak not of current man but of perfect man; desire not to succeed within society but rather eternity; give not for praise but kindness; cry not for thy brother alone while ten thousand souls needlessly are borne into the muddy ground of hate; seek not paradise on earth but Paradise of love.

Thank You

Friend, thank you for holding my heart aloft, for your empathy and sympathy for love lost; the memories, countless; the remunerations of youth; the soft hand. Your frankness, understanding and true smile.

Thank you for memories so vivid centuries might pass before I tired of their sight; a thousand years might fall before I lose the feelings I have embraced by your side or forget the love abounding in my heart.

I recall every smile from the moment of my birth. So many on your face reside. Every secret of my heart is open before your lock; the lazy confidence of truth.

Thank you for all you might have done had I been in need. Thank you for silence when it seemed the place. For giving me myself when I felt lost amongst a world of dreams. Thank you, friend, for everything.

With God in My Heart

I

I seek the divine warmth which once before cradled my heart in feelings of purity, wherein knowledge bled from the beauty of self and the relationship all things might feel if only they knew life in the true sense; with love.

I felt once entirely at peace, embraced by the Lord in the innermost place of sentient grace where the essence of life, the pure gift I, all men, all creatures, have been given, descended upon me and lifted my faith to a place above doubt.

I knew, after that, always that there was a God, that He loved me and would in death welcome me with such feeling that no one in this life might know the rapture of eternity. Yet, I still believe, that even in this world, I might find a path to Him.

It is a battle at times to close off the iniquity disgracefully played each day upon this blessed earth and attempt to renew the lingering relationship which hangs always hidden while I must interact and course through life in the ordinary way. My eyes cannot always be closed. My faith cannot always be full.

But I seek that which I cannot have; pray fervently each night that I might feel always the calm presence of truth found only in the Lord. That I might love as I feel loved by His presence. That I might forgive as I feel I have been forgiven. That I might hear the words just beyond my reach He seems to whisper in my heart.

II

That which I feel, others say I do not know, but I cannot deny such truth; I cannot deny Him or the equitable path His hands point toward. I must believe that all men may know Him. I must believe that this existence, this human time, is but a preparation.

Of what comes next, I cannot know, but the warmth of my perception foretells of wisdom, of grace, beauty and innocence. It announces the triumph of love, of freedom and the everlasting reverence for the divine and pure.

I cannot describe Heaven, though I cannot help but dream, to wonder and smile joyfully at the continuance of existence for I feel within myself at such moments as He is close that there is more, that life does not end when death arrives and brings to close this fragile earthly time.

I feel that there is a promise within the essence of my being which He has placed in all men so that we might know not to fear death or our human suffering; to tell us there is always hope and that much of this life is wrought with meaningless action, thought and need.

III

Lord, open my mind to Your path and the secrets which rest just beyond my fingertips even in the most silent moment when the world fades and my thoughts are Yours. Give me strength to be innocent in a world of disdain, where a pure heart is rare and a righteous man can scarce be found.

I know that I am far, so very distant, from the man I might be. I try. I fail, I know, but I try in earnest to live Your way, to embrace Your essence and learn from this life every lesson that I might. My eyes are open; so little do they see.

How greatly Your world shines when one takes pause to reflect and sigh, to stray from the pace mankind travels by and align a peaceful thought with the wind or passing, falling, leaf which floats rhythmically and triggers thoughts of awe always within the mind.

I recall a day the world seemed to glow. Never in my life have I witnessed anything quite so beautiful. The golden sun was soft, and in the shadows birds danced to their own chirps, which I could not but interpret as words of praise.

I once stood a dozen yards from a yearling doe and gazed within her eyes. How could I but find You within her wary glance? Within her, just as I, is life. We are different, yes, but we have come to be, naught from our own will, but by design.

IV

I hear the echoes of love ever cascading within myself; the overflowing equality of thought which tells me desperately that all men deserve my prayers for all men alike fail and may evolve above the abject motions of the past if only they take Your hand and attempt to realize that everyone is as worthy as themselves.

We all have the right to life. We all have the right to joy, to freedom, faith and hope. It is wrong, I feel, to deny these rights to others, to make war, for in Your eyes all men are truly equal and should be beyond enslavement or deceit.

My heart tells me also that anger is a plague and that it is impossible to rout lest I have Your help. How many vows have I posed that in moments became shattered as they were not made in true faith or carried by Your strength? Too many times have I slid from the perspective I seek, and for what reason? Only that I, alone, am weak.

Without Your help I am adrift, as if a solitary man upon the infinite sea of space, spinning about without hope of ever finding my way. Without You I am merely a man, empty, open for the claws of adversity to terrorize and overwhelm.

V

A learned man told me once that learned men are useless in the pursuit of God for there has yet to live a man capable of such eloquence as to describe the divine feelings we all strive to realize. I understand now a little of what he spoke for I have known things I am at a loss to describe or properly pronounce as great.

Yet to state that I am alive, surely in these simple words there are feelings to relate which every soul has known. I dare not imagine individuals pass through life and not once feel the fringes of wealth that might be found within. It saddens me to think there are those entirely devoid of God.

So little do I understand the atheist or those with overwhelming doubt. Have they not felt? Have they never been alone and pondered the essence of self? When they close their eyes, what is it they see; what is it they dream if they feel not the warmth which wraps me in darkness as if it is blessed light?

Fortunate, o' so fortunate we are that we have been given sense so we might reflect and feel; that we might glorify and rejoice; that our minds are open to ourselves and the promise of hope everlasting, breathing, pulsing, forever.

But forever is such a distant time. It strains the mind, the vast dimensions of God, the grand arrangement of All. I cannot but marvel at the intricacy of divine forethought and the infinite scale of the universe, of time and the unanswerable which in His essence is known.

VI

Within my heartbeat there is a softer sound of which I am not consciously more proud. It is the stirring of my soul, the uprising of hope glittering in the eternal sun which radiates from within, without and in every place of good. So gentle is the feeling, it echoes perfection.

And in this feeling arises the most pure logic; thoughts I have never known, knowledge beyond my grasp, but yet, at that moment, this entire existence makes sense, and I know I shall never doubt again for there is purity in the emptiness behind my eyes which hints of heaven and the absolute wisdom of joy.

It feels of manifest goodness, of peace with all things and love for all creation. It feels of cloud dreams and sunshine breeze, of the warm embrace of friendship and childhood laughter, innocent from every pain. It is a pause from grief, misunderstanding and the ever-growing disease of hate.

It lends to comprehension, the gallant belief in ideals and dictums of hope. It overlooks even for a moment the tears of pity usually on my mind as I contemplate man's state and allows the useless dream that someday all men may likewise feel the same.

VII

The presence of God. My body tingles with lightness. My eyes are soft with joy as I lay feeling and savor this moment, dreaming that I am always thus graced. The smile would never leave my face. If only all people felt this, there would be no war or coarse arrogance for in this feeling is goodness and the knowledge that I need naught else.

So long as I feel Him, I could sit in a dark, dank, cave, strapped to a wall while a whip flashed across my flesh, and I would love life. I would desire nothing except that all men might feel the same, for if they did mankind would be free from the burden of himself and become a community of happy souls.

And then might we all feel within at least a portion of the love Christ felt upon the cross when he looked upon his executioners and asked the Almighty to forgive. How blessed is this example of love? It uplifts the spirit and makes bittersweet every tear for in every tragedy there is hope and every trial the potential to realize the grace of God's help.

That I might be so righteous, my heart without blemish, but this is the true glory; that, though I have erred, my hands are still clean as long as I repent, regret, attempt to always wash away sin and strike out within the world with the unwavering desire to sin no more. I shall transgress, I know, but let it never be by choice.

I have been given shame to tell me I am wrong. I have been given reason that I might avoid traps of conscience and the flowing gowns of temptation. I have the burgeoning roots of wisdom that I might walk in a sinful land unfazed and prosper amongst disciples of condemnation and reply to their curses with soft words of peace.

Words. Words are useless when one attempts to speak of God. He is beyond all human comprehension save the universal language of feeling, of sensation and inspiration, which inhabit the shadows of consciousness and dart amongst our thoughts like sparrows in the wind.

Kindness dwells within me, but it also wavers at such times I fail my better self and hold myself high. Accursed vanity, I seek to banish thee forever from my thoughts; to cast thee off as if a cloak of feathers, but alas, your weight feels more akin to lead.

I wear also a burden constant upon my back which is none other than myself. It keeps me from Him, from the satisfaction of communion with the searching mind of faith. Embrace me Lord; instill Your guidance upon my heart; give me strength to rise beyond the tears I weep when you are gone.

Yet these tears do comfort; remind me of my place and the unending lesson that is life. In their warmth they recall Your own, and in their softness is signified the grace of love. And the path they wind upon my cheek; it is the course of life, always meandering, always moving to a place unknown.

Grand is the silence of those tears which fall not in pain or desperate separation but instead the wondrous moment we are rejoined. It is a welcome consideration to realize that we weep at both moments of deep suffering and those of paramount joy. It lends the mind to wonder that even in our woe there may be something well.

IX

I am but a child on a long, broken, journey where the souls of many have both fallen and been often saved. May Your presence as well guide me through the perilous seasons and precocious beasts time shall place along my way. May Your hand hold me up when I tremble or start to fall.

Before me lies a narrow path bordered by hypocrisy, deceit and the unknowing masses of ignorance. It is a treacherous way plagued with pits, junctions and the unwavering hand of commerce, greed. And though there are footprints to guide me, they are faint and often seem to make leaps I lack the faith to undertake. Yet, each time I stumble, the footsteps remain and give me hope.

Along this road shall I travel in solitude for, though many walk beside me, my path is unique. Still, I feel the breath of my comrades as each seeks his own road, and I feel sorrow when I hear them fall, as well as glee when they triumph over any of the hardships strewn upon the way.

There are days I do not feel like walking, while others I tumble backwards. Sometimes a burden slows me, while at times I tread in circles. Despite all this, the guiding steps remain, and repeatedly do they teach me that nowhere am I stronger or more joyous than when treading forward.

And when my steps are pure, it is then I know Your will; then existence makes sense and I find glory in every glance, in every countenance, leaf, stream or breeze, and my thoughts become true; I become a little more of You and a little less of man. And it feels right.

Differences

We all seek. We all reflect on mistakes and moments of weakness. We compare reality with dreams. We weigh truth and perception. We close our eyes and wonder, grand things; simple things; things no one else feels and no one else knows; things everyone thinks.

We all feel. We all learn. We all fight the formation of ourselves; the aging of our lives; the nearing of our deaths.

Yet we are different in a few material ways; our skin, our caste, our affluence, religion, residence. Our educated ignorance. Our intellectual foolishness. The way we comb our hair, wrap our clothes and sanctify ourselves.

Does this change the color in our eyes of the scarlet setting sun? Does it change the way the rain falls or the beauty of faith? Do these differences mean you are more human than I, or my heart is a little less real?

A Second Conversation

- Mystic: You seem down my friend. Is something the matter?
- Agnostic: No, no; at least not in the general sense.
- Mystic: But something does stir your brow to gloom.
- Agnostic: Yes, my thoughts do spin in realms of doubt. I question myself and find the answers lackluster. If I find answers.
- Mystic: Such is the fate of a man who wonders. Yet there is no solution except to ask yet greater questions and live more simply; to attempt to be wise, yet innocent.
- Agnostic: Is such a state possible? I often doubt; yet the two seem linked. I do not think a man can be truly wise unless he is also innocent, but I fail to know how to be innocent. How does one release the hold of maturity and continue through life with a fresh mind?
- Mystic: At first it must be enough to realize that such purity is desirable. Once one realizes his eyes are closed, he may then begin to open them, not before.
- Agnostic: It is true, but it seems every time I think my eyes have opened, I later find that I remain blind.
- Mystic: It is easy to fall before the falsehood of one's vanity and believe wisdom has been achieved when it is yet far from being grasped. It is often such that when we most believe we have found the light that we are buried most in darkness.
- Agnostic: But a man must have hope. He must be able at least to dream of a future when he is wise; when he has found the light; just as a man must be able to dream of a community on this earth in which men are truly equal, free and happy. That I might be wise is a dream. That the entire world be wise is a far greater dream. But tell me,

friend, though this is but dream, have I not the right as a living, conscious, being to hope, to wish and desire such a world. Have I not the right to desire a future greater than the past has ever been?

Mystic: If only every man had such dreams. But, perhaps, somewhere inside, they do. It is rare, however, that a man lives his life with such a goal in mind and directs his daily actions in such a way as to change, if not else, at least himself. "I dream." Many say, but what action do they take to fulfill such a dream? They say, "if only the rich gave to the poor," but they clutch tight every coin to fall in their hand. They say, "if only people treated one another with genuine amiability," yet they curse the strangers they meet and meditate on their differences. It is not enough to dream. It is not enough to expect others to change yet not change one's self. The path to righteousness, to equitability, may indeed be treacherous and steep, but if a man takes not the first step, never shall he find the way.

Agnostic: It is true, but the words themselves are easy. It is not as though, even after having tread that first step, one cannot fall from the path and begin again or, worse yet, lose entirely the desire to undertake the road. How easy it is to hold one's self to certain standards for a time, and then, once these standards have been broken, cease to fight one's baser self. It is easy to say, "what harm is there in this," or "no one else finds wrong in this," and on this basis ignore the morals which earlier have been set by one's self as worthwhile to abide by. I have many times told myself to treat others with respect. Each time I, at first, am vigilant and pause myself before I act rudely or disdainfully towards others. But without fail my vigilance wanes, and I find my eye turned scornfully upon another. And for a time my resolution fails, until I eventually rebuke myself and dedicate once more to the purpose. Is this a great battle of the soul? Of course not. These feelings abide within every man, but this does not mean I cannot at least attempt to fight the thoughts and rise above myself. It does not mean I cannot pass through life without taking offence to such individuals who condescend and act brutishly. I may acknowledge that their actions are against my notions of what a man should attempt to be, or even that they have harmed, but in no way should I avenge their actions or words with such low thoughts of my own. If one thought is spent, it should be of pity and regret that people act as such. That is all. There is no retribution. There is no stewing about the coarseness of the actions. But I know, in my

heart, I still think such things. Yet, though I sometimes fail, the more I attempt to change for the better, I gradually feel myself evolving from who I have been. There are actions I once did not think of. Then I realized they were adverse to the concept I have of life. So I fought to prevent them. Some no longer happen. Others I have yet to overcome. A few have slipped back into the general person of myself. But I shall again take up battle against these things, and gradually, they shall be removed from who I am. In the course of this life I shall attempt to form myself into the most righteous, wise and innocent individual I might be. That is my goal in life, concerning myself, though I must admit, this purpose at times strays from my mind and my actions fall.

Mystic: That the soul of a man might control his actions and guide his course through life, but such as we are, we must continuously fight with who we are, who we have been and who we might become. It is hard to change the fabric of your personality. We have been engrained with so many things, few of which seem good, and though we try to alter them, they linger in the memory of who we have been. If ever I have stolen, there shall always be part of me that is a thief. If ever I have lied, I too shall always be a portion of a liar. I may now not do these things, but the actions remain with me. They have helped form me, even as the desire to not do such things had influenced my growth.

Agnostic: I realize now how truly blind we are in this life. We speak of growth and fighting against ourselves, but the simple truth is that we do not know what battles we should fight and those to be left alone. We have no goal to set our sights upon. We speak of paths and roads, but we do not know whether one exists, let alone, if it does, whether we have found it. We may struggle our entire lives attempting to live a certain way, fighting our adverse instincts, but in the end, this pursuit may have been without purpose. We shall die, my friend; that is all we know. Of how to live there are but guesses. There is but each man's perspective, an amalgamation of his thoughts, lessons, experiences and the ever-present world about him.

Mystic: This you believe?

Agnostic: Yes.

Mystic: Yet you struggle still to live righteously?

- Agnostic: I cannot but try. Though I cannot know with certainty that it is a worthy goal, it feels as though it is. I can hope for no sign but that which rises within myself.
- Mystic: And has such a sign arisen?
- Agnostic: Nay, but there is still a sense of what is correct.
- Mystic: And what does this sense imply is right?
- Agnostic: Honestly, it wavers. Sometimes I feel there is no purpose but the evolution of self. But that cannot be all. There must be at least a proper way to interact with fellow beings; a proper way to evolve.
- Mystic: That does not answer the question, merely rephrases it.
- Agnostic: Perhaps there is no answer, or rather the view each of us has on life varies too much depending on mood, time of life and circumstances to truly be called our belief or feeling. Perhaps beliefs, as feelings and moods, are but passing instances of portions of who we are. Within each of us lives every doubt, every thought and feeling, but they can surface only a few at a time. The only constant is truth, but it as well finds its way only sporadically to our minds.
- Mystic: Indeed, we are creatures of varying constitution, but have we not a self which might describe who we are, irregardless of our current state?
- Agnostic: There is naught but the current state for we may live only in the present. Thus, at any moment, a man is who he seems at that moment. A man may be dishonest his entire life but at the present be honest. He is then, presently, an honest man. Granted, based upon his past, we may deduce that he will again be dishonest, but this does not alter his present honesty or necessitate he will ever be dishonest again.
- Mystic: Simply, you are saying that a man may change.
- Agnostic: Most definitely, although who he has been can never be altered.
- Mystic: Nor so easily the perception of himself.

Agnostic: How do you mean?

Mystic: A man becomes accustomed to acting a certain way. As easily as we become engrained with any ritual in this life and associate it with who we are, so can we become engrained with a particular self-image, even if it is no longer accurate or desired. How many stories have been told of a criminal wanting to mend his ways tarrying in his old way of life for no reason but he has lived it for so long it has become part of him? It is the same of anything that forms us or we at least perceive to be a part of who we are.

Agnostic: So a thief will steal even when he has no need and an old man will sit bored when he has retired from his work and reached at last the freedom of which he so long dreamed.

Mystic: So there is a continuity beyond the present thoughts and actions: our perception. It is within this that past and future achieve their reality.

Agnostic: I agree. But...

Mystic: What?

Agnostic: I do not know. It just seems sometimes, the more we seek, the less it is we find; as if the truth in this life is so simple that in searching we repeatedly step past the place we should be. And once past, we strive headlong forward, never considering that we have always been beyond our goal. I guess I am trying to say that our perception is false, and to diagnose and dissect something that is false is of little use.

Mystic: But what have we, save that which is or potentially false?

Agnostic: That is the small grain of truth we do have: that we are without truth.

Mystic: So we return again to doubt.

Agnostic: How can a man of truth live without it?

Mystic: I do not think he can, only a man of faith.

Agnostic: But of that, I shall never be.

Mystic: This I believe, but better a man of doubt than one of ignorant or blind faith.

Agnostic: Is there any other kind?

Mystic: True faith.

Agnostic: And what is that?

Mystic: The faith of hope.

Perhaps

I give up. Perhaps it is okay to hold a child's chin and scream in her face; to cruise down the street brandishing a handgun and a selection of curses. Perhaps it is okay to make war, to starve slaves, parade hate.

Perhaps we should all scream angrily and invest our entire lives for the wealth of another who treats us as a number or small piece of commerce. Perhaps there is no common bond which abhors usury. Perhaps there is no human race but rather an uncoordinated division of sects and nationalities who hold the right to proclaim themselves superior and seek to crown themselves rulers of the world.

Perhaps we should all glorify ourselves and forget the pain we felt when we were misused for it seems such things are not only right but preordained.

Perhaps, but in such things never shall I believe.

Confrontation of Self

I sat one day upon a rock to wonder at the Earth.

There was a teardrop under which I felt burdened like never prior in my life, and its presence swallowed me like a tidal wave of passion or cavalcade of yawns.

I fell within a strange repose of candid thought and whisper; like there was a burning songbird chirping in my ear. It lifted me up upon myself, as if I stood upon a shelf overlooking the vagaries of man.

And what did I find? Only my own face, its brow knit in ribbons of insidious concentration, while beside a child cried, pulling on my indifferent sleeve to tell me it was time to play and laugh; to be free.

“Hypocrite!” I cried to my blindness, “look, at least glance, down upon the face of innocence for which so long you have sought. It is not happenstance, thou fool, that the coldness of your heart melts when you look within her eyes. Look now upon the tears you wrought. Look down. Open yourself to her grasping hands. Love. Do not be afraid for it shall fare you well.” My face was unchanged, and in the shadows, the child crept away.

“Oh God!” I shrieked upon the rock, “what is it my fool self has done? I have pushed away a heart for the folly of my own mirage. Shall I never part with the streak of arrogance now strapped about my neck? Shall I ever live, love, this life as I state? I degrade my ideals with the actions of my hands. I disgrace my soul with the blankness of my thoughts. It grieves me, o’ how it grieves me, to realize I have abandoned innocence; that which I praise and hold aloft as great; that which I measure out as the mystic key of life.”

I closed my eyes and beat my thoughts. I sought my tears, but they were gone. I opened up and glanced about. A bird flew across the sun and chuckled, dancing in the air. I envied him. I was him. It was grand.

There was a curl of hair hanging before my eye, which in memory I did recognize. It was odd to see it there, growing from my skull, for the last time I felt its touch, it tickled on my nose as the creature's lovely locks brushed against my skin and made me sneeze and laugh.

It brought me down. She was the one ignored, standing in the corner, considering her loneliness. I reach out to gather her into my reflecting arms, but she is not there. She has grown old and abandoned me as once I did to her.

Sitting on the rock, I shake my head and scratch the empty place where once there was a mane of fur. I gather in my cane and slowly walk away, wondering in halting thoughts how so much time got between the day I sat down to think and the day I opened my eyes and realized who I should have been.

BOOK FOUR

Analogous Pasts, Presents and Futures

There is no evil but within man.
The devil is but a representation of our own baseness;
a chimera of the ill men propagate.
Goodness, however, is divine.

A Caveman in Eden

Chapter One

Introduction

It is hard now trying to remember the past; to tell a story, my story, when the feelings I had then are so distant. I scarce recall the harshness of life, the daily rigor; the hunting, the empty games and idle talk. It is hard to remember what it is like to be tired. Much longer and I will have forgotten. So I record this now, perhaps foolishly, but I must tell my story, if to no one but myself.

How I Left My Tribe

The rains had come again, and we followed the game into the hills. It was the same every time the waters fell. And we would follow it back when the land again turned dry. It was tedious, and I dreamed often of the stories my grandmother told me.

There were once tribes that did not journey but rather built homes that reached the sky. It was said they controlled the beasts whom we chased and even the waters of the great rivers. But that was long ago, before the ice. Very few believed they even existed. My grandmother did, and so did I. She had a shiny disc which hung around her neck made of a material no one had ever seen. Many believed it fell from the sky and offered my grandmother great amounts of food and hides for it, but she always refused. It had been passed to her by her mother who received it from her mother, and likewise, she said, back to someone who lived in the times before the ice. It had carvings on it that seemed to mean something. She told me the symbols once represented speech. I marveled at it often and tried to imagine living in such a place. Before she ceased to live, she placed the disc around my neck and told me she had heard, when she was young, that the remains of a few of the great homes still existed to the south, where the ice had not grown so thick.

The rains continued, and I thought of those far places. When I hunted, I thought of the stories of beasts twice the size we chased. Some of those creatures outlasted the ice, but they had not been seen for generations. I tried to speak to others of these things, but they laughed and told me those things were false; that my grandmother had created them to amuse me. I showed them the disc. They said no one could have made that; it must have come from a god. Even I remember when gods were the stories and the past the truth, but everyone by that time believed there were gods. And they multiplied. When I was young, there was a god of fire and war. When I left my tribe, there were three from that one; a god of war, of fire and of lightning. An elder told me

there were once only two gods, one of good and one of evil, and that all others were created from these.

I could not share in the worship of the new gods. I was outcast. Even the old man that told me of the creation of these gods told me I must pray to them and give offerings. Before hunting they asked the god of the hunt to bless them. When they killed a beast, they sacrificed the heart to the same god. It was the same with everything. For every action there was either a god to praise or appease. I spoke out, said that it was foolishness. I was chastised. The disc on my chest was said to have come from the god of evil. These were the same individuals that had said it was from a righteous god when it hung about my grandmother's neck. I was ostracized. So I left and began to wander southward. I would find the great buildings. I would prove to myself that what I felt was right. I would live there, alone if I must, and resurrect the past ways that made life easier and more enjoyable.

In Search of the Past

The footsteps were endless. Every hill seemed to reveal another behind it, and when at last I reached a crest, empty land stretched endlessly before my eyes. The days wore on, and I moved into a desolate land where trees were rare and water rarer still. The sun beat constantly during the day, while at night even the thick furs I carried did not keep me entirely warm. There was no food, no life, but I pushed southward. Eventually I would reach water.

I ate less and less, drank only what little I needed, but my means gradually vanished. When I swallowed the last mouthful of water, I was sure the next hill would reveal a stream. It had to.

The next day I did not think, or if I did it was of only food, water and the step in front of me. The sun seemed to spin above my head. I heard things, voices, rivers, but they were false. I rested, dropping from my feet and crawling beneath the hides. I would hide from the sun, napping, sweating, warm but at least veiled from its torturing eyes.

That night, I walked. I could not sleep. I felt death upon my heels, nipping as the frost; its claws furrowing further and further within my flesh. The emptiness; how it wore on me.

At daybreak I rested. Everything looked the same. In my sleep I heard the footsteps of beasts. My eyes tore open; nothingness; only the never-ending plain.

I tread forward once more. The hills passed ever so slowly, but after each I still believed I would find my redemption. I could not walk straight, weaving left and right as I crested yet another hill. I sat down to rest, staring at the ground. I did not cover myself, and the sun burned my already cracking skin.

I started as if from dead sleep, even though I was awake. I raised my eyes to the horizon, and something seemed wrong. Was that - yes, it was a bush, or

maybe even a tree hedging up beyond the next hill. I started to run. My pace soon slowed, my weary legs dragging. At the base of the hill, I could no longer see the brush. Had I imagined it? Weakly I began my ascent, resting after every dozen steps.

Finally, I reached the ridge, and there were trees. Three stood together around a dry streambed, and a single one was a few hundred paces beyond. The empty stream faded me for but a moment; the shade itself was paramount.

At length I stood beneath the trees, smiling, declaring to the sun that it would not yet take me. I then calmly sat, set aside my belongings and ran my hands over my face and through my hair. My head then met the ground, and I slept until the sun peaked through the branches onto my face, at which time I moved deeper into the shade and slept awhile longer.

When I awoke, I felt strong. Quickly I gathered my belongings and began walking. Less than half way to the next tree I was overcome with weakness. My nap had not helped. I felt worse than ever before. It seemed I was half blind, and my feet, how they ached.

Wearily I carried myself on faltering legs toward that tree. I nearly stumbled, catching myself by the hand against a boulder no more than knee high. If I had fallen there beneath the midday sun, I doubt I would have risen. My feet dragged. My arms hung limp at my side. The tree was closer but seemed still a journey away. A brief shadow circled; a bird of some sort. It seemed to wait for me to die. I sucked on my tongue. It did not help my thirst. Then the shade was upon me, and I collapsed.

When I awoke, if I had been asleep, I crawled to the tree trunk and leaned my head against it. A branch poked at my neck, but I did not move. I slept. I awoke. The sun had barely moved.

Three birds now watched me, hopping about some twenty paces off. They seemed to laugh at me. I wondered if I could catch one. Maybe if I was not so weak. I stood up and nearly collapsed, catching myself on a tree limb. I lay down again and drowsily began to sleep. A sapling growing from the tree angled into my sight. It was green, thin, fresh. I broke it open and sucked at the sticky fluid inside. The small moisture disappeared on my lips. I took another, a dozen. They did little to quell the dying feeling that had begun to creep within.

I dug beside the tree. Surely water was in the ground. But the ground was hard, I weak, and I conceded to once more take up step toward the south. The hills I staggered to overcome. The sun still groped my body thoroughly. Then, a hope; a line of bushes in the distance. Water. There must be water there. Five birds now circled in the sky, making strange sounds which seemed to mock my steps. And the steps were many, the dust tremendous upon my torn feet.

At length I heard a faint trickle of water. Then it was gone. I must have imagined it. But my steps remained constant. I felt stronger. This would not be my end. I would rest in the shade, and then over the next horizon, I would find water.

I stopped and then ran. The trickle had been true. I heard it now, the most beautiful of elements; life. My feet flew beyond themselves; tired still but triumphant. Then I skidded to a halt, crumbs of dirt at my feet tumbling into a crack in the earth wherein flowed the precious fluid.

On my knees I gazed into the chasm. It was more than three times my height to the water, and the walls were without break. I had found life, but it remained yet beyond my reach. Up and down the stream I looked but witnessed no change in the walls. So I began again to walk, the torturing sound of water ever in my ear, my strength fading once more. I thought to leap into the chasm. But I restrained my folly. The water was no more than knee deep, at most to the thigh. If I had jumped, I would not have survived. Yet I may have still made the leap had I tread much further before finding a descent.

When my foot first touched the water, I smiled as a child. Slowly I bent, cupped my hand within the water and raised it to my lips. Just a sip did I take and savor. Then I buried myself in the flowing waters and arose refreshed, alive.

I drank my fill and then slept in the shadow of the rift, rising at times to drink. It was early yet in the day; either that or the sun had ceased in its course to torture me. I ascended from the stream, skins filled with precious water, yet without food.

I followed the stream as it cut through the hills. I was strong with the water, but an emptiness remained. The chasm eventually widened and became more sloped. In the mud there were footsteps of many creatures, and towards evening I caught sight of one. After a tiring hunt, I sat beside a fire savoring the smell once more of roasting flesh.

I ate slowly, enjoying each morsel as it crossed my tongue. I ate only a little and then slept. I awakened in the night, the moon bright overhead, and refueled the fire. I ate a little more and then returned to sleep.

I spent the next day at that camp, venturing into the water and about to hunt. By the afternoon I had food enough for many days, water flowing beside me, and thus I relaxed and considered once more the great towns.

The legend holds that every room could be lit with fire by igniting a certain form of air that was controlled by the inhabitants. It is said food was cooked by the same burning air, forced into ovens of the same material as the disc about my neck. They did not hunt in those places but rather divided their food amongst them. The meat was always plentiful, and they found sustenance in many plants which have either ceased to be or have been forgotten as a source of food. And water flowed also into their rooms, at their discretion. It is amazing that such things were forgotten.

They were carried about by animals whom bid their heed and did not flee or attack them. And their language; how much greater it is said to have been, such as the markings on the amulet. It is said also that they were happy. But how could they not be happy when so much was provided so easily?

My dreams were filled with images I had never seen. I cannot conceptualize their world. I yearned to live at that time, more so to learn for myself the mysteries of that distant past and to build a world yet greater and more beautiful than ever before existed.

Chapter Two

A Morning at the Stream

I have always enjoyed the soft, natural, sounds of life away from the tribe. As a child I often spent nights alone gazing at the stars, watching through the pale moonlight the nocturnal life that abounds quietly while the creatures of day rest. I enjoyed best the time shortly before dawn when the sounds of night closed and those of light had yet to begin. Countless hours have I spent listening for that nothingness, yet within each moving, silence entreats the mind to new thoughts. There is something timeless in the void it creates, and when the mind itself is quelled, that rare occasion, true feeling descends upon the body, and then life, for however brief a moment, becomes meaningless, wonderful.

Such a moment did I find beside that stream, well fed after days of starving, well slept after days of weariness. After a time the silence was broken by my thoughts, and then life began to wake and move about. I reignited the burned out fire and watched the sunrise. What more did I need than what was right there? I had food and water, but that did not seem enough. For the first time since I left, I thought of those I had left behind and wondered how life fared for them. But I knew. I had lived too many days as they were living. Nothing changed except by the seasons, and they as well were repetitious. Yet no one understood this. There were still those that feared the rains, when falling, would never cease, and when the land was dry, that they would never return. But the rain always returned, just as the sun rises every morning and falls every night. Yet there were once many that feared each night that the light would never return. How ignorant we were, this after creating so much. The ancients are said to have charted the stars, as with the cycles of the sun, moon and seasons. But it was forgotten. What could have caused the loss of such knowledge? Surely even the ice, which destroyed buildings and towns, could not destroy the minds that contained such wisdom.

Continuing the Journey

Unknown days did I spend beside that stream before again taking step toward my goal. I followed the flow of the stream and in less than half a day came to its confluence with a river. I rested the remainder of the day at this juncture, considering what course to take and relaxing. I sang a song my mother had taught me before she ceased to live. The words echoed against the cliffs across the river, and I was happy.

A soft wind stirred waves in the river. A fish occasionally peaked from the water, while predatory birds circled overhead, hunting. They were impressive in their dives, clutching in their talons the vastly different life. I had never considered it before that life existed in a grand array of forms. I heretofore had thought of life only in terms of myself and my fellow tribe members. Yet it was vastly more. As I walked I gathered in the seeds from a passing plant and shifted them in my palm, slowly letting them fall. From each of those could potentially grow another plant. Again it was a new thought. Why had I never thought of it before? Why had no one? Of course, someone had; that is how they fed themselves; they controlled life. One would not need to stagger through life in search of food if he knew always that there was food where he had planted it. And with constant food there would be no reason to move with the herds. Perhaps, if enough food was grown, the herds might be fed and remain nearby throughout all the seasons. It seemed so simple, but no one lived like that. But I understood, and for the first time I considered the seasons as a whole, a cycle that could be easily planned to coincide with the planting and harvesting of plants. I grew overjoyous and dreamed that I was the founder of a great tribe and great town. I would find the ancient places and observe them, learn from them and then with my expanding knowledge return to my tribe and lead them to an easier life.

I walked downriver many days, my thoughts a confusion of new ideas, dreams and wonder of how little I had known when my journey began. The season changed, and still I followed the surging waters. The land at times was barren, while generally it reminded me of my homeland. Occasionally everything was green.

Eventually the river widened, and then it flowed into a seemingly endless lake. I had heard of such great waters before, but as I stood upon the shore, great waves filtering away at my feet, I was overwhelmed by the vastness. The wind blew strong and sprayed the waters in my face. They tasted different, bitter. Birds I had never before witnessed walked along the shore, unafraid of my presence. The sun glimmered in the distant waves, and I was blinded. Laughter flowed from within, and I danced in success. Surely they had lived here, these ancient men; what place better than the edge of the world?

I turned from the great water and looked at the landscape. A hill rose to the east of the river; its crest different than any I had ever witnessed. Somehow it did not seem natural, despite a covering of shrub, grass and sand.

At the crest of the hill my eyes came to rest upon structures which had stood unseen for time unknown. It was incredible. For all I had dreamed, never had I imagined feats as these.

A Look into the Past

The remains of an unknown world stood before me; dirtied, yes, but magnificent still to my simple mind which before had seen no structure more grand than a hut of wood or tent of hides. Three, four, five times my height these buildings crested, and yet they seemed broken off, for some seemed to lean on others, as a falling tree will occasionally come to rest upon itself. And below the ground, how far down might they dive?

It was then I realized that time covers this world gradually with dirt, and these buildings had remained undisturbed for such a time that they had been partially consumed. Again I was astonished by my ignorance. How many times had I brushed aside the dirt from familiar objects after an extended season? But never had I considered that beneath the ground entire worlds have been engulfed.

I considered my own tribe. We had built nothing to be buried, save our skeletons and meager tools carved from the earth. In the future, should someone such as I stray upon the lands we traveled, there would be nothing to incline him toward the thoughts which stirred within my head.

I spent the remainder of the day searching the ruins, then a second day. I dug within the earth and discovered materials I had never before witnessed, as well as great amounts of material similar to my amulet. There was stone too, some exquisitely carved, although quite worn.

I managed to enter one of the structures, and while I could proceed only a short distance within, new sights appeared at every movement. I know not the use of most of the items, no doubt they were ordinary things, but to ignorant eyes such as mine, they were marvelous. A vague sense of how these beings lived began to form in my mind; I sensed them in the decaying places and through my thoughts flowed glimpses of their lives.

Yes, here a child had laughed. And here a proud chieftain had passed many days of life. The sense of a mother lingers; her warmth yet glowing, even from her distant death. There has been happiness in this place, life beyond anything I had witnessed. I dreamed such great dreams while I slept amongst those ruins, but in time, I yearned for society and determined to return to my tribe.

Ignorance and Banishment

Many seasons had I passed amongst the past, digging amongst the buildings and collecting articles of a world I was only just beginning to understand. The rains twice had come, but as I set step up the river, the land was once more dry. I carried many small treasures. I hoped they would influence the closed minds I returned to. I did not yet realize how futile my words would be.

I came upon my uncle on the outskirts of the hunting grounds and walked with him to the tribe. He was changed, perhaps not as greatly as I, but his words fell oddly from his tongue. New meanings seemed attached to words I had known from my childhood. And then, upon entering the tribe, he paused to sacrifice a portion of his kill to a god with which I was unfamiliar. I was astounded. Never in my life had anyone sacrificed anything except the heart.

I waited silently until he had finished the ceremony, and then we entered the village. It too was different; smaller, more unkempt. I did not recognize many of the faces. What had happened? But I was hesitant to ask for I did not feel welcomed, even by my uncle.

Eyes looked at me with distrust. There were whispers and sneers. I remembered strangers entering the community in the past; they were always welcomed warmly and invited to share the stories of their travels. And travelers of our own who returned; everyone rejoiced at their coming. And while I had left under strained circumstances, I had never been the subject of such ill will as I felt upon my return. I was welcomed into no tent. I was offered no food. It seemed almost as if they feared me.

I was led into a large tent and found myself before three older men. One I recognized as an elder of the tribe but the other two were unknown to me.

“Do you not bow before your lord?” Asked one of the new men.

“That is not the custom in my tribe.” Answered I.

“Do you not come from this tribe?”

“This is my tribe.”

“Then how is the custom of this tribe not your tribe’s custom?”

“There was no lord when I left, and thus, no one to tell me to bow down.”

“Silence!” The second stranger stepped forward as he yelled. In his hand he held a spear. “How dare you speak such insolence.” He lowered his spear toward me and advanced. I held my ground, waiting.

“Enough!” The elder spoke. The attacker retreated but continued to glower. “From where have you come?”

“The ancient cities to the south.”

“There are no such places.” It was the first stranger whom spoke.

“And what did you do there?” The elder asked.

“I learned.” And so I told them of all I had witnessed; of growing plants and herding animals; of permanent buildings and the cycles of the seasons. I

showed them the items I had found buried within the earth and what I imagined each was used for. And when I was finished they dismissed me without a word.

I stood outside with my uncle, waiting, and after a time, I asked him what had happened. He refused to acknowledge any change, but he seemed more afraid to speak than ignorant. It was unlike him to be afraid of anything.

At length I was called forth. The elder spoke.

“You have been deemed unclean. Leave our lands immediately or be ceremoniously purified of evil.”

I did not fight. It would have been useless. As I walked the last time amongst faces I had known, I realized that they had become strangers. A child I had oft spoken with stood among the assembled gawkers. I went to him. He looked away, ashamed. In his hand I placed a small weapon I had uncovered in the earth.

“The buildings are there.” I told him. “Follow the great river.”

Then I was torn from him and pushed away. Curses rang upon my back. Those same voices once praised me. A stone struck upon my nape. I did not turn to see who threw it, but that individual, no doubt, was once a friend.

I wound my way once more toward the river. Doubt bore heavily upon me, and I questioned at length whether it had been worth my while to stray so far from everyone. My search for knowledge had cost me my home, as well as every familiar face. Despite that, I found little regret for my banishment. Having discovered so much, I could have never ignored that knowledge and pretended to be like everyone else.

Upriver

I stood again at the rivershore and considered my life. Through my mind flowed varying thoughts. To return to the ruins; that would be useless. I had nothing left to learn there, at least in solitude. If only I could convince someone to go with me. But no, it would be folly to return to them. Maybe in time, but if I was to put into practice all I had learned, it would have to be with others, individuals of reason and open mind.

I went north. Every stranger I had ever met arrived from there, and always they spoke of numerous tribes in that direction. One of them would be bound to listen, or at least accept me.

I stayed along the river, and as the days passed, I observed signs of life I earlier would have overlooked. But the shores were vacant as I passed. Then I was surprised to find myself amongst a small gathering of ruins. No doubt they had been passed countless times without recognition. I remained awhile examining them but learned little.

Days unknown passed, but I continued upriver. Eventually, I would find someone, or the end of it.

Chapter Three

Many lands passed while I journeyed north, some barren, some which reminded me of my home, while an odd few teamed with beauty such as my eyes had never dreamed.

I walked through a most desolate land. The great river was perhaps a third as wide as where I had lived. I climbed a hill beside a waterfall. As I crested that hill, I sank to the ground, weak. I slept.

When I waked, I discovered the land into which I was set to journey. It was incredible. Once more my perception of beauty was redefined. Surely here, I thought, someone must live. Then there was a flash of light along the edge of the beautiful green, which dominated the valley into which I stared. And beside the light I observed the familiar movements of my kind.

I drew towards the scene but stopped short. These creatures were not such as I; rather they looked similar but were much smaller. But upon them only briefly did I gaze. The light became apparent as a creature also similar to myself, although infinitely more magnificent. In his hand he held a weapon which seemed made of fire, and he brandished it as he spoke in strange words to the small individuals who seemed to abandon the beautiful greenery for the desolate land from whence I came. But they paused, looking back upon the fiery being and apparently pleading with him. Their words were without merit, however, for after a short response, they once more began their journey. I considered following them, after all I had likewise been banished, but I was drawn to the light of the other being.

As I approached, the being turned to me and spoke so I could understand.

“You are welcome.” At this his weapon vanished.

“Why were they not?” I felt as if I could ask anything.

“They disobeyed their god and attempted to deceive him.”

“So there is a God?”

“There are many. These humans are new. Their God as well is new to this world.”

“I do not understand.”

“Just as your God bred you, man’s God has bred him. Your breed has lived itself out and shall be replaced by these humans, just as your God has passed His time and been replaced by theirs, as He once replaced another. It is an act repeated with each generation of higher being, beginning with the Creator.”

“And what of the Creator?” I asked. “Does He not care of this World? And what of my God, shall He so easily stand at rest while His creation is destroyed by the spawn of the next?”

“The Creator rules your God, their God, the God of this world, as well as myself and my kind. He rules all. He knows all, but does He care? Not such as

you care. He knows too much to care. As does your God. And thus he steps aside and allows the creation of another to replace his own.”

“What of the God of this world? You speak as if my God is not the same.”

“Your God rules your race. Man’s God rules him. The God of the world rules the world, nothing more. Although he is a mischievous being. He haunts and confuses the creations of every God. Others he fights. These men, and their God, he will fight.”

“Why?”

“Because of all that has happened thus far. Man’s God tested His creation by forbidding them the fruit of one tree in this entire garden. The God of this world, for His own amusement, induced these human beings to eat of that tree. It was a game to the God of this world, but the God of man attacked the God of this world by transforming a creature of this earth, one of the God of this world’s own creations.”

“What did He do?”

“He removed the legs from the serpent.”

“How shall it move without legs?”

“Upon its stomach shall it slither, and in retribution shall the God of this world strike oft upon these human beings.”

“Shall their God protect them?”

“I do not know, but He is fickle. Should mankind stray from Him, whether led by the God of this world or not, He may strike worse upon their heads than ever would this world’s God.”

“And where in this shall my kind exist?”

“Your race shall coexist for a time with these human beings, but as they multiply, they will replace you entirely.”

“Why then did we live at all?”

“To have lived.”

“Is there nothing else? It seems hardly worth having lived if there is no more.”

“You forget, however, that because the life you lived seems unworthwhile, life in its entirety is an extremely worthy reason to have passed your time on earth. I did not say that life ends with your death. I did not say the lives which have passed so ungraciously since time began. Nor did I speak of the lives of these human beings. I said merely life; the true meaning of the state in which you find yourself is far beyond the mortal body by which you eat, drink and sleep away this earthly realm.”

“But what of everything that has been accomplished thus far in life? If it is erased, it shall have been all in vain.”

“Yes, but life shall not have been. Consider your ancestors whom built great cities and mastered both beast and land.”

“You know of them?”

“Yes. But what do their cities, laws and proprieties mean now? Nothing. They are gone. Their words are forgotten. Their great feats are buried. When you are gone, no one will even know they accomplished anything. But they were life, just as you and I. This is the only thing that is important.”

“If this is true, then how does it matter in what fashion I live my life?”

“The fashion is irrelevant, but in living some methods are superior to others. There is no wrong way to live, but based upon the actions undertaken in life, happiness increases and decreases. The more one closes off the irrelevant actions of the world and focuses on life, the happier this being shall be. Pure feeling, the enjoyment of life, is first among the eternal laws. Above this is the extension of this feeling beyond one’s self. In worldly terms; to first secure your happiness, but of greater consequence, to secure not only your happiness but that of others. Alternatively, it is the ultimate violation to do the reverse; to interrupt the happiness of another being.”

“But to live as such would be impossible.”

“Not so, but the path to realizing such a state on earth no one individual can traverse. It would be possible only if no one was ever shown how to do wrong.

“Take these human beings for example. By enticing them to eat of the tree, the God of this world has lessened the happiness of the humans. They, by following his deception, have decreased the happiness of their God, whom in retribution has decreased their happiness by banishing them from this garden. They now have been taught deceit and revenge. They know now what it is to sin against the eternal.

“Each generation shall teach the next the lessons they have learned in this first generation. No one will question that these actions are sins for they will be commonplace, and it is rare indeed that anyone considers whether or not what everyone does is right. In the thoughts of mankind, it shall forever be believed and taught that it is acceptable to interrupt the happiness and lives of others. This trait is not natural to man, as on occasion a few of them shall realize, but with each generation, with each additional vice bred of these first, the pure state of a human being shall be further buried.

“Nearly every human being to ever live will do so without realizing the pure life he is capable of. What should be the first of traits among them will be called goodness and kindness, and those to live by these ideals will often be mocked or looked upon as unique. Acts of kindness will be rare, sometimes marveled at, at other times praised as actions uncommonly good. Worse still, actions adverse to life shall be praised. Even some of the worst will be tolerated and occasionally honored.”

“But surely,” said I, “they cannot stray so far from the way things are supposed to be.”

“They will error in much greater ways than these, just as your race has.”

“Have we really lived that badly?”

“You have been much less than you might have been, but as the humans shall be blind to the true life, you have been taught to accept these things as part of who you are. You are incapable of attaining your true state in this life for you have been formed already too much by things that are wrong.

“Do not, however, interpret my words to mean that there is nothing good or worthwhile in this life. There is beauty, but where it might be widespread, it is witnessed at but intervals and all too often it is surrounded by filth or unseemly ideas formed by the untrue belief that things that are necessary need not be beautiful.

“Take architecture for example, such as the great cities of your ancestors and those the humans shall no doubt build. At their height of culture, they had the ability to create beautiful structures intermixed with the beauty of nature, but what did they create? Buildings with sharp corners and little beauty. They stripped the ground of its grass and trees and paved it with stone. They planted occasional trees and sculptures to beautify, but of what they might have done, I doubt you can imagine. And this was in the most beautiful areas of their towns. In other areas the ground was stony gray seemingly without end and their structures were built with ghastly contrast to the example nature provided.

“And what were all these structures and roads for? Neither to inspire life or increase their enjoyment of it. Within these structures, both simple and grand, they propagated their business of society, plaguing their minds with unneeded stresses and irrelevancies. Yes, there were places of joy, but who among them resided in these places except in rare moments? Happiness arose through their lives, but most of the time their feelings were empty, their thoughts wasted on the varying businesses by which they deceived each other in the supposed attempt to increase their own happiness. Their society spun in a circle of self usury, yet few realized it, fewer still mentioned it and but rarely did anyone attempt to change it.

“What was most odd was the fact that, though nearly everyone at moments passed into their true state, or at least an incantation of it, they did not comprehend that the feeling uprisen in that moment was how they might have felt at all times. You have, perhaps, witnessed in your own time someone’s eyes smile forth with true life; when everything about them appears aglow with hope and joy. It is found most often in children for their innocence holds yet ties to their true being. The eyes of lovers also shine this way, but alas, too little. It comes only amongst the moments of true life, which for most individuals are rare. Sadly, some lives pass entirely without once feeling the joy of pure life.”

At this the being ceased to speak and beckoned me within the garden. Only then did I comprehend his words. For the first time in my life I was alive, and from my eye crept a tear for all those that had lived, as well as those yet to live, whom had never known the true feelings of life.

Chapter Four

As through a looking glass, I have watched this world change; as it were in my Paradise; alone; happy; terrified by the horrors taking place at the hands of those for whom this joyous place was created.

I observed with horror the first murder of this new race; so young were they to life, yet already had they learned to disparage it.

The world passed on, and my own race, as had been foretold, dwindled. At places they waged war against man, while in others they intermixed, creating yet a third type of individual whom over time became indistinguishable from mankind.

Humans became wretched quickly, plaguing each other with cruelty and deception I had never before witnessed. They began to build cities, first small, then larger. And as these places increased, the worse individuals became. Then the world was overcome in a deluge; the wrath of these people's God. Few survived, but quickly they returned to their ways. The seed of deception had not been wiped out.

Cities again sprang forth. Wars sprouted as if grass from the earth. Cruelty bonded itself to every division of their kind. They became base. They became slaves of themselves. They tortured. They lied. Yet they did not know they were wrong. And happiness still managed to raise its head in their eyes, yet so little it seemed to appear compared to the abundance of thoughts and feelings adverse to it.

I was shown a child whose eyes glowed with the same beautiful life I felt. She danced with a pup and smiled; such a forthright, pure, grin. I was shown this same child a year later. How she wept with pain, her skin boiling as about her burned her house, the vengeance of her father's deception. That child had harmed no one. Her screams tore at my tranquility. I wanted to reach out, to save her, but alas, she was gone.

"Remember her smile." The being told me. "It is by far more important than the suffering of her death. She knew for a moment the truth."

I have observed men spit on a starving man. I have heard laughter at the pain of others; cackling whispers of spite and derision so vastly different than true laughter. How they use each other. They divide themselves at every turn; nations, races, towns, dialects, castes, wealth; how they hate.

Yet we were the same, my kind. Did I not attempt to convince others my way was right? Did they not force me to do many things? The chief; what did he give to the community to warrant their goods in return?

How could one individual refuse a starving creature food only because that being has nothing to give in return? How does one charge others for something that costs him nothing? How does any individual look with spite upon anyone

else; can they not see their own faults? The line of falsehoods and mistruths which seemingly everyone has been led by; how did I not realize before the folly of it all? I see it now. I weep for the people who are sad; deceived by themselves and their societies into accepting their lives. How can the beautiful arise only to be destroyed? How? They simply know no better.

I have watched men create the most beautiful realities, only to have them die with their creators. The individuals about them failed to comprehend the beauty and its benefit to mankind. They create beautiful things, but instead of spreading the knowledge of how to create, they hoard this knowledge and sell the products of its creation. They have no concept of increasing the well being of all. They see only their own institutions and systems. How I want to shake them awake; let them feel as I feel. But even when they do feel truth they seem unchanged by it.

And of war; how can I wipe from my memory the endless death these beings have cast upon one another? From that first murder the blood has scarce ceased to flow. Indeed, is there any greater intrusion into the life of another than the ending of it?

But the travesty of war goes far beyond the death. Soldiers, as well as nations of individuals, are taught to hate. Yes, they have known this feeling before, but for men to encourage and endorse it is inconsistent with true life. They are taught to kill other human beings, a lesson no person should learn. They are taught to scream, to obey without reason; to be slaves. But little is new in this for nearly all people have been taught to be slaves in some fashion.

Of course a few men have enjoyed battle. Some societies have praised it above all else. And after a few millennia had passed, mankind assumed this warrior blood had been with him from the first. But he was designed to harm not one creature, especially his own kind.

That they eat meat is of no import. That they might have lived in paradise and never have learned to take it is. Imagine that first man driven from this garden, treading upon the soil of my ancestors, a barren place. But there were creatures there. How amusing it seemed to one expert in the hunt to watch him chase those beasts and then, when he had captured one; it is impossible to relate the look on his face when the blood flowed on the ground. I believe he realized then that he was made of the same. They ate the flesh raw for a short time. Then fire was shown to them; a gift from which God I never have been sure. They struggled, but they lived.

Endlessly might I detail the course of humanity, but to what use? To look at any era, any community, is to begin to understand them all. Nearly any face will suffice to represent the rest. They all fall by the same flaws and rise by the same joys. Their technology changes, as do their governments and religions, but at the core, the life within remains unchanged. Take a man from any era, teach him from birth in any other, and he will live his life regardless, unknowing he represents another time. Until he has been shaped by his surroundings, that

individual is pure. He possesses the unique individual abilities nature has provided him with, but nothing else. He speaks no language. He belongs to no nation. He knows nothing of societies, castes, etiquette or propriety. Given only himself, he knows only life. He would never do wrong if no one showed him its path. But from the moment of his birth he is taught to transform to the way the world is instead of being allowed to grow of himself into the world that should be. Had their God sought to erase the sins of the first human beings, he had to do no more than take their children at the moment of their birth and raise them Himself. With nothing but Perfection to learn from, they would have likewise been perfect.

The Death of a Man of Peace

“In the Helvetian camp... those who emigrated... numbered 92,000 capable of bearing arms and the grand total of 368,000. Pursuant to Caesar’s orders a census was taken of those returned home, and the number was found to be 110,000.”

- Julius Caesar, *Gallic Wars*, 58 BC, XXIX

“[The Nervii] senate was reduced from 600 to three and their men capable of bearing arms from 60,000 to barely 500. To demonstrate his compassion for the unfortunates and suppliants Caesar was careful to preserve them. He bade them return to their territory and their towns and ordered the neighboring peoples not to injure or molest them.”

- Julius Caesar, *Gallic Wars*, 57 BC, XXVIII

I

An early morning breeze rustled the treetops approaching the farm before dipping down to whistle amongst the grazing cattle and fields of grain. It was a small farm separated by a series of wooden and stone fences into four fields and an open clearing. The largest field was bursting with grain, except in one corner where the harvest had already begun. The next largest field was covered with cut, drying, grass, while in the remaining fields, three cows, two horses and eight sheep carried out their leisurely lives. Near the grazing cattle stood a simple wooden structure with a sodden roof into which the hay would eventually make its way, as well as the animals if it became exceptionally cold. Not far from this structure, in the clearing, stood a small stone building used as a silo and storeroom. The clearing was otherwise broken by a dozen crabapple trees, two giant oaks and the farm’s one room stone house. From behind the house, which sat higher than the fields, a stream ran through the two fields with livestock. From in front, a path, wide enough for two horses or a small cart, ran beside the grain field and the short end of the hay field before turning through the forest for a few hundred yards where it joined a larger road. The farm totaled about five acres.

A man stood in the doorway of the house, gazing over the fields in the early morning light. As the breeze swept against his face, he breathed in deeply and smiled.

“Eolas.” A woman’s voice called from the house. The man turned from the fields and went inside. His eyes closed to adjust to the darkness, and as he reopened them he looked upon the familiar sight of his wife placing the last of three bowls of porridge on the table in the center of the room. There was also a pitcher of milk he had only minutes earlier retrieved from one of the cows. He walked past the table to the far end of the house and sat down on the solitary bed wherein slept a young girl of about four years of age.

“Danu.” He said softly as he brushed away a few gentle curls of chestnut hair which had fallen across her face. The girl nestled further into the blankets, smiled briefly as her father repeated her name but did not open her eyes. Eolas moved his face close to hers and again whispered her name. The girl smiled and then her eyes burst open with a peal of laughter as Eolas kissed her on the cheek. Now that she was awake, he picked her up and, swirling her in the air, carried her to his smiling wife.

A few minutes later, they seated themselves at the table and commenced with breakfast.

II

The air was filled the rhythmic swishing of scythes as Eolas and his wife tread forward and back amongst the grain field. They moved in seeming unison along overlapping lines, he always a step beyond her blade. Danu sat on the fence edging the field, sometimes watching her parents, sometimes watching the family’s two dogs playfully chase each other about the sheep. Earlier she had followed her parents with a stick and beat at the few stalks which avoided their blades.

“Well, Damona,” Eolas said to his wife as they finished a row, “think that’s enough for the morning?”

“Aye.” She replied while wiping her brow with the back of her wrist. “It seems a reasonable. We’ve reached the quarter mark.”

“That we have, my love.” He said as he leaned his scythe against the fence. Damona did likewise. “If we push ourselves, we can probably finish tomorrow evening.”

“There’s no rush.” She answered as they walked toward Danu, who was now standing on top of the fence.

“True,” he said as he placed his arm around Damona’s waist, “but once it’s done, we don’t have to worry about this field until it’s time to plant again.”

“Look.” Danu said as her parents approached. She pointed behind them, and when they turned, they discovered a small cloud of dust rising above the

trees where the path made its way from the road. After a moment two horsemen appeared and trotted towards the house. They were attired in the summer uniform of Roman cavalry officers, although they did not wear their helmets or seem armed. Eolas lifted Danu from the fence, and the family approached the soldiers.

“Greetings.” Said the older of the soldiers. His hair was trimmed short, ich revealed a sizeable scar across the crown of his head. His greeting held a thick southern accent, of the Gauls below the alps, as well as the unquestionable pronunciation of a Latin tongue.

“Welcome.” Eolas said, and then added in nearly perfect Latin. “We can speak in Latin if you prefer. We both understand.”

“Thank you.” The same soldier replied in Latin. “We request fodder for our horses and a place to rest for ourselves.”

“Certainly.” Eolas answered. “If you would like, we were about to eat and would welcome you at our table. Your horses will find plenty to eat in the field with our own.”

III

“My name is Lucius.” The older soldier said as he walked to the house with Eolas and the second soldier. They had just set the horses free in the pasture. “And this is Marcus.” He motioned to the younger soldier, who was about the same age as Eolas.

“Eolas.” They greeted. “My wife is Damona and my daughter is Danu.”

“She is a charming child.” Lucius said as they entered the house. He smiled at Danu as he seated himself at the table. The girl smiled shyly in return before running after her father as he went to fill a pitcher with water from the stream.

“Do you have children of your own?” Damona asked. Her Latin bore a moderate Gaelic accent.

“My son,” Lucius said as he lay his hand on Marcus’ shoulder, “sits beside me.” He smiled. “I also have a daughter, Dido. I never saw her at that age, though.”

“Why not?” Damona asked as Eolas and Danu returned.

“Is those days I did not get much leave. I went, I think, eight years without going home; starting when she was about two.”

“It was nine years.” Marcus corrected. “From when I was eight until I was seventeen. And then you were only home briefly before the civil war started and you were gone another three years.”

“That must have been hard as children.” Damona said as she sat down at the table and they began to eat. The meal consisted of bread, butter and cheese, as well as a choice of water, milk and wine.

“At times,” Marcus answered, glancing at his father, “but we were always proud. Still, it would have been nice to have him come home a little more often. But there was more war in those days; more glory. My father brought much honor to our family in those days.”

“You find something disagreeable with my son’s words?” Lucius asked Eolas, whose demeanor had become clouded at the end of Marcus’ comments.

“Let’s just say,” Eolas answered, “my memory of that time has little to do with either honor or glory.” Lucius and Marcus shared a guarded look before Eolas continued. “Oh, it is nothing against you, or even Rome. Even had Caesar’s armies not conquered Gaul, there would have been war, either with the Germans or simply amongst our tribes. And while my personal tragedy was carried out by the Roman hands, it might as well have been my neighbors for I have heard that nearly every army handed out such atrocities.”

“What happened?” Marcus asked. Lucius was silent and had pushed away his plate in favor of a cup of wine. His face had the look of a man about to hear a story he knew too well.

“It was twelve years ago,” Eolas said, “that the Roman army defeated our people. Of this I make no complaint; when one wages war, one accepts the consequences of that action; but my father in all his days never lifted a weapon against anyone. He, as I have since, spent his days on this farm, tending our crops, rising our livestock and passing his knowledge to his son. He enjoyed life, even after my mother died when I was a young child. This, perhaps, was best for her. I dread to think of what the soldiers might have done to her.

“After the battles were over, Caesar ordered the farms and fields of our people destroyed; I suppose as message to the other tribes as well as ourselves. My father and I, having learned of this, moved half of our harvest into the forest, as well as a portion of our animals. We prepared small hideouts in the woods to which we might flee if it became necessary. We finished none too soon.

“Returning from the animals in the forest, I was startled to find a dozen cavalry roaming about the farm. I paused at the tree line and watched as a four of the soldiers dismounted and surrounded my father. They mocked him. I think he surprised them by telling them in their own tongue to go about their business, to ransack the farm that had been built by the endless toil of himself and his forefathers, and then to leave. They laughed a little and beat him briefly before joining their comrades in burning the fields, our storehouse and slaughtering our livestock. When they had finished this, they rummaged through our house, taking anything they considered valuable before setting it aflame. They, all twelve of them, then turned to my father. The debate was loud, and I could hear almost every word. Some wanted to sell him as a slave. Others wanted to kill him. One man alone suggested they leave him with his suffering, but his voice was soon drowned out. They shoved him about, gawking at him, cursing and belittling him. This, my father, a man of peace; a man who had never harmed anyone in his life and always welcomed strangers into his home

with genuine kindness. I seethed with rage as they decided to kill him, it seems because they could not decide how to split the profits if they were to sell him. I ran from my hidden place and sprang unexpected upon them. But I was a child; what could I hope to do against twelve armed men? Only by my father's valiant strength was I able to flee when he ordered me to do so. I can still hear the sound of their swords hacking into his flesh as he screamed at me to run and not look back. And so I ran, tears streaming down my cheeks as I wove amongst the trees a few yards ahead of the few soldiers which had taken up pursuit. I eluded them, curled myself in a dugout we had made and wept tears of revenge until night had long descended. I then crept back to this house and found my father's mangled body on the burned out doorstep. This is what I remember of those war filled years when armies crept across the land in search of honor; I remember twelve cowards murdering an unarmed man. These same men, no doubt, have been called brave and earned such glory such as you have lauded."

"I am sorry, son." Lucius said when Eolas had finished. "People did things in those days which no reasonable man should ever do, things they shall regret the remainder of their lives. It is not an excuse, there is no excuse for such actions, but there was so much blood, so much killing in those days, that there was nothing, absolutely nothing, that men would not goad themselves and others into doing. Believe me son, as much as you have suffered, my eyes have been witness to much worse." He glanced at Danu, who had fallen asleep on her mother's lap. "Much worse."

Then there was silence, and Lucius and Eolas shared a deep, knowing, look. After a moment Lucius nodded and turned to his son.

"It's time we were going." He said, and the Romans rose from the table. "Thank you for your hospitality." He said towards Damona, and then he turned and left the house. Marcus gave a slight bow and followed after his father. A few minutes later they could be heard galloping toward the road. Damona carried Danu to the bed and lay her down to rest. She then returned to the table and sat beside her husband.

"What was that all about?" She asked with a sympathetic voice which seemed to already know at least part of the answer.

"The scar on his head," he said, "is from one of our scythes." With that he arose and headed to the field, where he remained without resting until the last ray of light drifted beneath the horizon.

The Last Words of a Heretic

“Burn the sinner!” With a howl the crowd took up the call of the black clad priest. I laughed. What could I do but laugh?

“Heretic swine!” The priest slapped my face; his rich ruby ring left a mark on my cheek. I laughed still, looking out upon the screaming crowd, and then I pitied them.

I was led by strong arms from out the town to a small knoll where already the legions of mean vassals of church and state had gathered a bounty of firewood around a large wooden post which in the morn had not been present. I know for I sat there and watched the not too distant seas and smiled as I duly read my books and pondered a vast many things. It was there I found time to realize my rib bones were not so different from those of a cow or pig. There also, in many days gone by, I read the words of Plato, Mohammed, Buddha and ancient Hindu poets. It was there also they seized and bound me. They lead me to town, before the council of the church, and those men, after examining my books, both those I had with me and those from my home, questioned and condemned me.

“Good citizen,” the priest began, “do you know what day this is?”

“Sunday, I believe.”

“So you knowingly were absent from the house of the Lord on His Sabbath day?”

“I am not so sure Sunday is His Sabbath.” Said I. “The Jews worship Him on Saturday, the Mohammedans on Friday. I have read the Holy Book, but in no place did I find it written that any of these are right.”

“Blasphemer!” The priest replied. His rotund face was red with anger. “Is it not enough that you fail to worship the Lord in His house and are found reading heathen literature but now you question the sanctity of this day? I pray brother, confess your sins and rescind your ways; for the benefit of your own soul.”

I laughed. I could not help it. Yet, I suppose his plea may have been in earnest. Perhaps he believed it was within his power to save or damn my soul.

“Why do you laugh my son? Are you so overwrought by sin that you cannot see that what I say is for your own good?”

“I see only that you fear me for I have no need of you, and were others to realize such as I the false, worldly, games you play, they might as well find no more use for you. Then whose money would you spend and how would your

delicate feasts be supplied? Nay, I doubt little you have ever said has been for anyone's good but your own."

"You condemn yourself with your words. Have you nothing else to say in your defense?"

"Only that once a man was condemned by the elders of his church on accounts of heresy and other lies, and yet he was indeed the Son of God and incapable of such crimes."

"You would compare yourself to Christ?" The crowd screamed for blood.

"Nay, I would compare you to the Pharisees whose power blinded their eyes to truth."

"Burn the sinner!" The words sprung ravenously from his lips, and thus I soon found myself bound upon the post, my books in a pile at my feet and a dozen men set with torches to light the pyre ablaze.

"Shall you repent?" The priest once more pleaded.

"Of any sins I may have committed, yes. Of that which you charge me; I do not."

And so it rests now. The priest is praying a final prayer for the redemption of my soul, while about the villagers smile gleefully upon the blood sacrifice to their Lord. I must admit, however, the priest puts on a good show.

Found in the Black Forest

December 8, 1944

Last night Privates Wilhelm and Schmidt deserted. They slipped off while on watch, unnoticed, leaving behind their rifles and ammunition but taking their rucksacks and, it seems, extra rations from the mess tent. Even a few weeks ago I would have sent a detachment after them, but now, I will do nothing. It has begun to snow, morale is low, and simply, there are no longer enough men under my command to undertake such a fruitless mission. Every day we are driven back by the Americans, and reports from the east; well, they do not sound good. I fear the reinforcements we desperately need will never come.

December 9, 1944

We have entrenched overlooking a road leading into a group of heavily forested hills. It is a solid position, which we should be able to hold against a force even twice our size. I finally had a chance to confer with Peder. His platoon is stationed adjacent to mine, to the north. If either of us loses many more men, we will have to combine the platoons, as we did with the remnants of Karl's platoon a few weeks ago. I still think of him when I get the time and find myself staring at the same fate. His men had to leave his body behind when they retreated. The captain berated them for it, and I was angry too. I realize now, however, that they had no choice. If they would have tried to collect the body, some, possibly all, of them would have also been killed. I have tried on three occasions to write his parents but have been unable to find the appropriate words. I need to write them. Yes, they will learn of his death eventually, they may have already, but I think it would comfort them to hear that he spoke often of them and that he died with honor.

December 10, 1944

The captain was finally able to determine our location. We are still in France, albeit by only a few miles. Word from headquarters is that we have stopped the enemy's advance and are preparing an offensive.

We finally received some much needed supplies; blankets, rations and first aid material. The company medic had run out of nearly everything.

Private Strauss had to be sent back with the supply trucks. He has quite a bad case of gangrene. This leaves me with thirty-three soldiers; roughly half the number I led into France some twenty-eight months ago. Twenty-four dead. Eleven wounded and unable to return to duty. Two deserted. These are the numbers I live with. I gained eleven soldiers from Karl's platoon. Three of them have died. This makes twenty-seven killed under my command; all but one within the last six months. These men, my children; I hope I did all I could to prevent their deaths.

December 13, 1944

It has been a busy couple of days. Many troops have passed by in preparation for the offensive. We remain at the road; just in case, I guess. I have heard that we will move out on Friday, but there has been nothing definite yet. Peder thinks we are being held in reserve to guard the retreat, should it become necessary. If he is right, it is not a good sign as regard the confidence of the generals in this mission. But if we regroup any further, we will be fighting in the Fatherland itself. The day the last of our troops are pushed into Germany is the day of our demise. Already we have lost all we gained in the previous five years. For the first time I find myself doubting the abilities of the generals in carrying out this war. Nor am I the only one. We have been beaten. It is hard to write, but it is true. The Führer should make peace now; otherwise we may lose even our beloved Fatherland.

I finally wrote Karl's parents.

December 16, 1944

We left our encampment and headed west for the first time in many months. By what reports I have seen, the fighting has been fierce but our troops have made good progress.

December 25, 1944

Christmas day. How I remember as a child sitting beneath the tree, playing with a little wooden mannequin Father Christmas had left for me. We had roasted goose for dinner, and my father tobogganed with my brother and I. It snowed, and I sat beside the fire with old Mozart watching the storm unfold. He nuzzled me so I would scratch behind his ears. We fell asleep there together,

and no one woke us up or bothered us. I remember vaguely the sound of my brother laughing as he wrestled with my father.

That was eighteen years ago, I believe. My brother is now dead; his body buried somewhere in the Russian steppes. My father has grown old and writes in his letters about the war in which he fought. We lost that war too, as we are now losing this one. Our advance is stopped. We receive no reinforcements, while the enemy builds daily in strength. Oh, where have you gone young men of Germany? Is there no one left to pick up arms and stand side by side with us, your countrymen?

I have lost eight more soldiers. Privates Johansen, Mahre, Krauss, Kohl, Werner and Sodenburgh, as we all corporal Schwartz and Sergeant Krenz. I promoted private Werner, Fredrick, to corporal and corporal Schmidt to sergeant.

I was grazed by a bullet last week and received eight stitches. The doctor said it would heal nicely and barely leave a scar.

The cooks surprised us at dinner with a cup of Glühwein. It is unfortunate that they only had enough for the officers. It would do the men good to have a taste of home.

There was fighting even on this day.

December 28, 1944

I had to execute private Krone this afternoon. He attempted to leave the lines during battle. I ordered him to resume his post, and throwing his rifle on the ground, he turned his back to me and walked away. I drew my pistol and ordered him to halt. He did not. I gave him one last chance. I told him I would shoot him if he did not return at once to his position. He did not waver in his step so I fired and he fell. The men, some of whom had turned to watch the scene, were silent and turned toward the enemy. They must hate me now, but it was something that had to be done. Had I let him walk away, others would have been sure to follow.

Private Bohn and sergeant Schmidt were killed in action. I promoted corporal Werner to sergeant and private Himmel to corporal.

Only fifty-seven infantry remain in the company. If things ever settle down, we are sure to be moved as a platoon to another company, or disbanded altogether and assigned individually to units in need. In any case, it has been a honor to lead these men.

January 3, 1945

It is all over. Our army flees. My men; I have no idea where they have gone. Some are dead. Others are probably captured. Some, no doubt, have found some niche to hide such as I.

I write this entry in a small barn some miles east of the battlefield. They broke our lines, and we had no choice but retreat. But before we could do so orderly, they were upon us. Their tanks crawled like giant beetles, crushing our dead beneath their feet.

A soldier drove myself and the captain from the field as bullets streamed passed our heads. I fired out the back of the open vehicle. When I turned around, the captain was dead, hunched over, one arm hanging out the side of the vehicle. We had to leave him like that when the truck ran out of fuel. The soldier, private Weiss, and I retreated on foot, mile after mile, searching for signs of our troops. We found none. As night fell, we saw this barn and cautiously approached.

It is cold, but we cannot afford to light a fire. We have little food. Private Weiss shivers in his sleep. Hopefully tomorrow we can find some of our soldiers. If not, I do not know what will happen to us.

January 5, 1945

We have spent the last two days walking through the forest. Sometimes we hear planes overhead. They are not ours. Though we conserved the best we could, we ate the last of our food this morning.

Private Weiss told me that Peder is dead. Though it is not unexpected, it is still a shock. We had been together since the academy. I have so many memories of him, but at this moment I cannot recall a single one. I cannot even recall his face.

January 7, 1945

This morning we stumbled across the road where a month ago the company was entrenched. It is now in American hands. If they are not already, they shall soon be in Germany. We circled around through the woods. It is hard because we cannot move very far without resting.

We have not eaten in two days, and last night we had to sleep in the snow. Private Weiss coughs almost constantly. I think he has pneumonia. If we do not find shelter soon, he will probably die.

January 8, 1945

I had to abandon private Weiss. He simply could not go on. His only chance is that the Americans find him. It is better he be taken prisoner than to die from cold and starvation in the forest. I left him near the road and watched until he crawled up the embankment so he might signal any passing vehicles. He turned briefly toward me when he reached the road and raised a silent hand. His face looked like that of a corpse.

January 9, 1945

Still no food. There is a village near the bottom of this hill; a German village. But there are enemy troops in this German village. I never thought I would see the day.

I cannot feel my toes and am afraid of what they will look like when I take my boots off.

When night comes I will try to sneak into the village and find some help. It is a risk, but one I have no choice but take. Even now I can barely walk fifty yards without resting. I have thrown away everything but my clothes and my canteen.

It smells good though; the land. It smells like winter where I grew up.

Notes by a Bitter Man

Fools! What ignorance abounds throughout the world, especially, it seems, wherever I set my feet. Do people not see the irrelevance of their actions? Can they not understand the way life could be? How it irks me when I observe at work people caring whether the product they produce will sell. It should have never been made. I will do what is asked of me to earn a wage. I will not care. I will not take interest. I will never cease to wonder how others become so involved in such things as increase the fortunes of the few on the manpower of scores of others, especially when to make this fortune they take advantage of thousands, perhaps tens of thousands or even millions of their fellow people. Try to tell me to care whether your corporation fails when you have made great sums from my work and paid me but a trifle so that in order to live I must spend all I earn and thus never move closer to being free to live life as I desire. Try to make me dream of owning such products as you would have me desire. Try to make me believe that politicians promise things to people for any other reason than in hopes of being elected. Show me someone who actually cares about the well being of others. I have never met anyone that does. Better yet, show me someone who actually helps others for reasons other than personal gain. Perhaps such people exist, but I have never seen one.

Why I am bitter once was I asked. I looked upon the person whom spoke, shook my head and asked how they were not when people made such importance of things that were pointless. This man put great efforts into producing a product. He awoke in the middle of the night thinking about work; the place he had for thirty years been a slave. He had been convinced that the company was gracious enough to employ him for so long. How backwards this seems. The company should have been overly thankful that he remained. But a company; that is one of the primary faults of this world. Such things are not real. They are made of people, but somehow this unreal thing becomes something more important in the minds of some than the people of which it is formed. Nothing man creates is more important than people. Nothing. No things are equivalent to men. No land is worth the life of a person. How can I not be bitter when all that the world revolves around is so drastically adverse to people holding in such true, high, estimation the people around them?

It is disheartening to watch people run through the course of their daily lives; to observe the routines by which men divide their lives. Out of amusement I followed the man who lives in the apartment next to me every

morning for a week. It was amazing the exactness in his schedule. At exactly seven fifteen he walked out his door. From there he walked to a coffee shop, where he remained sipping coffee and reading the paper until seven forty-three, exactly. He then walked to his office, always by the same route. A few months later, I followed him again, just for a day. His schedule had not changed, and fully do I believe that every day, Monday through Friday, he coursed out his day so exactly. One day, I spoke to him as he exited his apartment, attempting to engage him in a brief conversation, just to see what he would do. He was polite but excused himself by saying that he would be late for work if he did not leave at that time. I let him go. I did not follow him, but I know he went to the coffee shop just the same. He merely had a few minutes less to read the paper, which, in recollection, he did not seem to enjoy anyway, almost as if he read it because if he did not he might not be able to take part in some conversation later in the day or merely because it had always been part of his routine. I imagine his life will vary little until he retires. But I suppose he feels comfortable in such a life and probably has never expected to live any other way. It just seems less than a life should be. If he was happy, I might readjust my conclusion, but he does not seem a happy man. This is at the root of my bitterness; that people have come to expect no less than a life such as this man lives. Granted, he may someday be married, but I cannot help but wonder if the day will come when his wife some morning wishes to speak with him and he brushes her off in order that he might sit in that coffee shop and read his paper. That would be unfortunate.

Notes by a Tormented Man

There are wounds on my back that never heal. I would like them too, but I cannot help but scourge myself. I must be punished when I sin. I judged a man the other day, thought myself better in some way than him; eight times did I bring the leather strips upon my back. As I felt the blood with my fingers, I crossed the many scars and scabs. I wept. For all I have transgressed, they were but a trifle of the wrath God should cast upon me, but I can only hold the whip for so long before I grow weak from pain. Once I continued until I collapsed. I did not awaken until the next day; the ground was rank with drying blood. I fasted for three days after that, appealing to God to remove me from this life for with every breath, it seemed, I was descending further into the clutches of Hell.

I am a fool. I read the Bible constantly, yet in its words I have yet to decipher the correct way to live. The truth must be there. Yet, there are times I doubt the Book; I doubt God. At such times, I lay in the dark and drink my tears; everything seems so worthless, useless; often have I screamed with the torture of such doubts. It feels as if my mind is being lapped upon waves, crashing on occasion against my skull, sometimes against another, unseen, wall. It pains me. I curl myself tightly around myself and pray to God to reassure me in my doubt. Praying helps. I feel better. I tell myself that God has calmed me. Then I consider that I am calm only because the act of praying calmed me. Doubt again washes my faith. I pound my chest. I tear my clothes. I claw at my hair. The darkness grows dank. Evil seems to dance before me, and in my doubt, I shudder in fright, desperately seeking for the faith that only recently swelled within my heart. I listen to it beating; it sounds foreboding, as if threatening to cease in this my weakest moment. I cry for faith. I repeat every prayer I know, but at that moment, they always seem empty. It hurts to lay there. It hurts to doubt. Yet, in the morning, when the sun has arisen and I crawl, exhausted, from my bed, my faith returns in earnest as I gaze upon the beautiful world He has created. On my knees I grovel for forgiveness and thank Him for this life.

Wretch! Discontent hypocrite. Again I have sinned. Shall I never cease to error? I gave a dollar to a beggar, and he spit on me. Such shameful spite arose within me, and I thought to curse him. How could I have fallen so low as to condescend to insult my fellow man? I asked the man to forgive me for thinking ill of him. He spit on me again. I slapped him. From where does such rash action arise? I ran from him to my home, to my dark room and punished

myself until I could no longer feel the blows. I slapped myself in the face and said, "That is how it felt to him. Such pain have I caused." I prayed for mercy, but unto a sinner such as I, God need not be merciful. "Turn the other cheek." Said He. I have levied the blow against that cheek.

Notes by a Happy Man

Why is it so rare that people write of happiness? Perhaps because woe and sadness are much easier to depict. Besides, what adventure is there in joy? But in feeling it; to state that I am happy is oft enough to recall to any mind the past instances of felicity that have risen throughout the course of life. Nonetheless, I shall attempt to relate the happiness of my life.

What better place to begin than the day's end, when at last I put away my books, close my eyes and allow my thoughts to wander, to ponder the great many ideas, dreams and memories which flutter constantly about my mind? How warm my body feels as such, pulsing with feeling, goodness. How can I not smile as I rest or even as I recollect lying so placidly in my bed, alone, free. I seek nothing more in life than joy; in those moments I know it constantly. Sometimes I can feel my heartbeat. Sometimes I can feel my soul, at least what I have always considered my soul. What else should I call the waves of feeling which fill me at those times? What else feels of manifest goodness and allows the self to soar as if it was free from this material bond called the body? Such euphoric feelings; it is no wonder I lay for hours both at night and in the morn merely absorbing the grand feelings coursing throughout myself.

And how to describe the joy of awakening when the sunlight has long filtered within my simple room and I have for an unknown length of time lain betwixt the joyous state of half sleep and the equally amazing state of full consciousness? How the dreams do spin, the feelings curiously endeavor to surround the body with peaceful slumber one last time; then the eyes fly open and I am awake. Sweet day it is every time I awaken so naturally, no matter where it is I lay my head. Sometimes there are birds singing outside my window and, after I have opened my curtains fully, I lay in the warm sunshine and listen to their choir. Sometimes it rains; likewise do I lay enraptured by the natural rhythms of the world. Other days I rise immediately and stretch my arms high above me, my body fresh, my mind at ease. A new day has arrived, a new circuit of life; how could I be anything but pleased?

Some days I pick up a book and begin to read, continuing happily a story I quit to enter sleep when my eyes at last grew too heavy to allow my mind the luxury of absorbing the thoughts of another man. Other days I rise immediately and fix my breakfast. Some days I do not eat for many hours; occasionally not at all. Such little relevance does food hold to me, yet when I do eat, such tastes

surround my tongue, no matter how plain my meal. I consider often the grand marvel that is this human body.

How shall I state the joy with which I look upon this grand life? How do I describe the twinkling in my eyes as I look upon the world turning, a tree growing, a bird flying, dropping, rising, gliding, his wings flapping until, seemingly tired, he drops slightly in the sky before, strength renewed, his wings once more arise and lift him on his course? Grand is this life in which the wind blows the tall trees, and in their branches images appear. I have oft stared upon a distant fir whose branch appears to be a bear running across the sky. At other times it seems a wolf, while, of course, it is often but a tree, itself magnificent, an incredible feat of architecture of hand unknown. Many times have I walked so deeply enveloped within my own thoughts and observations of this grand world that I forget this strange society we have created for ourselves and simply smiled because I am alive.

Such rapture do I feel to stare upon the beasts of this world, whether the most domestic or fantastically wild, whether they work or play or merely exist such as the cattle, horses and buffalo I have so often seen. To stare into a deer's eyes as he ponders you; how great is this, how wonderful to know that in him is life. A butterfly passing; how can I not follow the trail he weaves in the sky? A squirrel pauses in his tracks to study me, as likewise I pause in my steps to study him. What have we in common, he and I, this little beast with paws, fur and tail large? Is there a common bond other than the blood which flows within our veins? Is there more? Of course, I cannot answer such questions, but to think them; such great joy do I find in asking. Yes, I find wonder and beauty in most everything. Every action of my day in some way creates within my mind a memory of joy. How can I not love this life? How can I not cherish the being which I have been given?

Without end could I describe the actions of my day, as well as the interactions with my fellow beings, both human and those with less intellect. Conversations I have had fill my mind with pleasant recollection. I remember faces, moments; all of these form me and have created the feather light fabric of my life. I remember a woman, sad, whose eyes lighted when I asked her to tell me of her happiest childhood memory. Tears of joy crept from her eyes as she told of how she and her sister had once dressed in their mother's clothes and danced away the hours of a distant rainy day. How she laughed when but minutes before she had been ready to cry tears of sadness. We talked a time and then parted. I have never seen her again, but always will her smiling, joyous, face be part of me. I remember watching a child dance, her eyes afire with glee, and in her shadow, I saw her mother; her eyes wore such pride, it raised my spirit higher yet. A man I knew who smiled at all times, and his laughter in even the most poignant moment was a blessing for it was pure and seemed to touch the lips of everyone. Oh these faces, memories, acquaintances; how blessed are they in their joy. Such is this beautiful life. As a leaf blows through an empty

winter street, happiness streams its way through the world, passing from one mind to another or erupting unseen from within and dancing outward to assorted nearby faces. I feel the joy of all men. Hopefully they as well feel mine for as long as I have life, it shall abound.

On the American Occupation of Iraq

“Change the channel.” A general quotes to the suffering Iraqi people weeping at the images of death paraded each day across their screens, crying at the mutilated children and innocent mothers torn apart; as if this is something to be ignored.

“One hundred twenty-five rebels killed.” A nonchalant headline reads, as if the men were stock options or football players suffering from a loss. Meanwhile their comrades call them patriots and mourn their deaths with vengeful thoughts and oaths to drive the Americans from their homes.

“There can be no excuse for war.” My ideology describes, but many are the reasons for which men kill. “Death breeds death.” I wrote, I believe when seventeen. “Hate breeds hate.” I also quote. I do not recall why I scrawled these lines, but in the light of passing time, I have come to understand myself.

For every soldier/insurgent/rebel/patriot’s death, there is a young mind formed in the belief that it is okay to kill; to make war, hate and contemplate the murder of one’s self for the benefit of a cause, be it vengeance, freedom or the American way.

Soldier; an Epitaph

“I am proud,” says the child, “of my father for all he has done in life; the sacrifices he made to keep me safe.

“Though I did not see him for many years, my mother told me how he fought the wars to bring the world peace; so I could be free.

“But what is it to me that I am free if I have not love? What is pride without joy?

“He is dead now in this recent battle.

“I did not know him; how can I be proud of a stranger or tell those that will ask who my father was? Will I say that he was a soldier?

“This seems an accurate account for it seems this title meant more to him than being human, much less a father to me.”

A Stuffed Lion

As the clouds drifted from before the sun, half of the shadows covering the small boy's face vanished, leaving behind a soft version of the balcony across his brow. He sat in the doorway to the apartment, with his feet outside, watching the small world of strangers play on the ground five stories below. He rested his head on his hands, which in turn were propped by his elbows on his knees. His eyes moved slowly to his feet, and then his attention was distracted by the swift arrival and disappearance of a hummingbird. The boy was not sure he had seen anything at all, but he remembered the sound, the soft thumping of repetitious wings and silent chirps of disappointment in finding no flowers or birdfeeders to enjoy.

The boy glanced inside. It was dark. Somewhere within his mother was sleeping, while his father read a book at the lamp in the living room. He sat in a big chair, which the boy was only occasionally allowed to sit in. Someday he would be big enough to sit there. Someday he would be big enough to do a great many things. But not now. He could not climb on the couch. He could not run in the house. He could not go outside, even though the door was open and the breeze felt good. That is why he sat there, staring at the forbidden, clutching his lion.

The stuffed beast was soft and always listened to him. It was always his friend and would never be mean or blame him for anything. Not like his sister, or his father or mother. They yelled at him sometimes and did not always want to play. But the lion; he was always willing to run about the world of imagination or simply to be cuddled, or to comfort the boy when he was scared or felt the evil eyes of blame on his shoulders. He was there when people said things the boy did not understand, or when his father was angry. The lion was also there when the boy was angry; to be kicked, admonished and apologized to. The boy always felt bad when he hurt the lion and begged forgiveness from his friend. The lion always forgave. He was unconditional love; a friend who would never complain, even as the boy grew older and slowly forgot the beast, locking him in box after box until, as an old man, he rediscovered his old friend; his imagination; his innocence; his self love; and clutched the lion to his breast and wondered, what if he had always held his friend so close? What if he had remained so blissfully ignorant of the world and run innocently through life with his own pride and marveled always at the way rays of light moved across his arms or how a butterfly sounds when it laughs?

But what-ifs are pointless. They do not change memories, only make them harder to forget. It does not alter the man he has been. So he sets the lion on the mantle and looks on it only occasionally with regret; a strange feeling at times that he never grew up; that he was still just a child and everything since had just been a daydream. And the small boy shudders. He clutches his lion tight and steps onto the balcony to get a better view. He knows his father's voice will soon call him back in, but just for a while, he wants to be free.

Charisse

I

I stood outside the factory watching white pillows of smoke rise loftily into the sky and marveled at the industrial construction of the vast, sprawling plant. It seemed like a skeleton, as if the metal pipes along the walls were ribs and the metal siding underneath was but a temporary construction awaiting the future addition of a skin of wood or stone which would make the building look like a house or office. But it had been awaiting that final step for eighty years.

The machines inside rattled and lurched with noxious fumes and deafening sound; tearing down trees; creating pulp, plank and paper. The air smelt of a mix of fire, sewer and sap. The seagulls, screeching shrill cries of protest, never flew directly overhead, waging aerial war against unseen toxins and terrestrial noise. A sign at the gate informed visitors and employees alike that it had been twenty-eight days since the last serious, work related, accident, while men in hard hats, carrying giant lunch boxes or paper bags and coffee mugs, streamed continuously from the parking lot to the building. In one of the few windows of the megalith hung an American flag, somewhat discolored from years of wind, rain and putrid droppings from the smoke stack overhead.

A car honked. It honked again. I turned and realized I was standing in the road. The man's face was angry, and his knobby middle finger gravitated toward me as I moved and he drove past into the opening gates of the factory. It seemed as if it was swallowing him; as if it had always been swallowing men, wearing them out, draining them of life.

A whistle sounded the change of shift, and after a few minutes the factory doors spewed out a horde of weary, dingy men. And there he was; my brother, cursing as he always had about the various actions of his day. He did not notice me, though by the time he reached his automobile we were only twenty meters apart, separated by a chain link fence. I did not call out.

I walked to my car and followed him to the parking lot of a small tavern. Three other cars from the factory parked beside his, and when I entered the bar, the four workers sat together at a table awaiting their first pitcher of beer. The room smelt of cigarettes and alcohol breath. The bartender was an obese man who seemed to sweat, though the room, to me, was quite chill. He eyed me with the eyes of a man wary of strangers. All the eyes in the room, except my own, glanced over me with the same look. The men at my brother's table. The man

and woman playing pool in the back, beneath a light which seemed about to fall. The three men at one of the other two tables. They had been talking raucously when I entered but had become almost silent. Their eyes were also unfriendly. The other man seated at the bar who seemed drunk and disillusioned about something. His head rested lazily on his hand, and his face bore a look of oafishness. The bartender handed me my drink and took my money with a look somewhere in the area of disdain. The three men continued their loud conversation about football, beer, brawls and drunkenness. My brother's table was more subdued.

My brother. I wondered if he recognized me. It had been eighteen years. Since that day. Since the tense relationship of youth slipped into the emptiness of adulthood. Since the last grains of hero worship fell from a younger brother's eyes and crashed softly on the silky plain of silence. Since the mute stare.

I had always marveled at his exuberance and grand exploits in a world I had yet to enter. How could I not? He was seven years my senior, and while I wiled away on the dusty paths of little league fields, he was the captain, the star, of the high school football team. My eyes shone those Friday nights. The fans cheered my brother's name. My father's name. My name. I idolized him. I stood in young teenage awkward lust as he paraded his cheerleader girlfriends before my father's equally lustful, less awkward, eyes. He was everything I was not; brash, confident, strong, popular and funny. Everything I was not; callous, vulgar, violent and angry.

II

Seth's eyes narrowed and then halted a moment before opening wide with a false sense of awareness. A few seconds later they closed, and he fell into a restless, dreamless sleep. His daughters, four and six, watched his head droop and cautiously crept from the couch, where they had been resigned to sit beside their father. Seth began to snore unevenly. The girls paused at the first noise before continuing to the toy box at the far side of the living room. They pulled out first two coloring books and a box of colored pencils and for a time lay silently on the ground filling in outlines of rabbits and butterflies. The eldest, Gilda, tried to take the purple pencil from her sister when the young girl, Charisse, began to color a flower stem with such an inappropriate hue. Charisse protested with a moan, and the two yanked back and forth on the pencil until Gilda let go and Charisse returned to her work. Gilda turned to a blank page and traced the alphabet in uneven letters. She then spoke with her mock teacher's voice, when she tried to sound authoritative and adult, and began to quiz her sister on the letters. Charisse, at first, paid more attention to her coloring, but at Gilda's insistence, she abandoned her pencils and sat cross-legged like a good student should. She stood in line, at the front of an imaginary

class, and then marched behind her teacher/sister about the house in stout obedience. When they reached the door to their father's office, they peaked back around the corner to make sure he was still asleep before entering.

Gilda sat in the plush chair and pretended to be the principal of her school. Charisse stood before the desk as a student awaiting either punishment or praise, both of which escaped her sister's mouth. While she stood leaning against the desk, she played with her father's rolodex, moving the cards about and turning the tray in circles. Gilda typed on the keyboard and pretended to read information from the screen. To her sister she associated many of her own experiences in school; her poor report card; the time the teacher yelled at her for talking; the time daddy picked her up twenty minutes late; assignments she had been given; judgments she had received. And then she stopped being a teacher and decided to portray Charisse's mother. This was harder to imagine as she only vaguely remembered their own mother. She had died in an accident when Gilda was only three. But still she remembered a few small things. She remembered the curls in her mother's hair, just like those in her sister's. She remembered her smiling; not her actual smile, just that she did so often. She remembered mostly that she was nice and, if she remembered correctly, that daddy was nicer when she was alive. As it was, the mother she portrayed was mostly a mix of herself, her teacher and her father.

Charisse did not remember her mother, although she felt a sense of longing she did not understand any time her thoughts considered the second parent she was supposed to have. She recognized the pictures of Oriel. She vaguely comprehended that she was dead, and that besides having the same curly hair as the woman in the photos, she shared the same brown eyes and slight scattering of freckles beneath her eyes. She was quiet compared to Gilda, and often when she was alone, her eyes settled in an expression of light sadness which would have seemed thoughtful, if not wise, to any compassionate looker on.

"Do what I say," Gilda said in her best parental voice, "or I will beat your ass." Both girls smiled at the word they had repeatedly been told not to say but so often heard.

"Yes mommy." Charisse responded, and immediately she pushed the rolodex to her sister as she had been told.

"Thank you daughter." A held back smile.

"Mommy, I want some milk."

"How do you ask?"

"Please."

"Okay." Gilda poured an imaginary glass of milk and handed it to her sister.

"Thank you mommy." She guzzled the imaginary liquid and licked her lips as Gilda joined her from behind the desk. She was smiling and began to tickle her sister. They both laughed and rolled on the floor, tickling each other joyfully, laughing.

“Quiet!” The sound of a waking giant. Gilda and Charisse froze; their laughter silent; their eyes open wide in half terror.

“Get over here;” Seth’s voice called angrily from the living room, “now!” The girls clambered to their feet. “One.” They ran from the office, leaving the door open, the rolodex on the floor. “Two!” They reached the living room. Seth, still laying on the couch, looked angrily at their progress. They halted before his glowering gaze. “By the time I get to three, you had better be standing in front of me.” The patter of child feet. The exhale of tired father breath, angry from lack of sleep. “What were you doing?” An inquisition begun. Two blank stares. “Well?” A terse question. A raised eyebrow. The cornerstone of tears.

“Playing.” A weak answer from the eldest child. A parental stare of distrust. A swat on each bottom, the eldest first, then the youngest. Tears from four eyes.

“I told you to sit here on the couch. Now,” a standing giant, “sit down!” Four little legs dangling from the couch. Two little hands embraced in comfort. Dreams of school and daycare. Memories of happiness. Restrained silence.

“How many times have I told you not to go in my office?” A loud question. “You do not go in this part of the house. You do not go into the kitchen. You do not go in this bathroom. You do nothing unless I tell you to. Do you understand?” No answer. “Answer me! Do you understand?”

“Yes daddy.”

“Yes daddy.”

“Who was playing with my rolodex?” The voice called a moment later from the office. There was no answer, and the footsteps of the giant padded angrily back to the couch. “Who was it?”

“We both.” The sentence remained unfinished.

“Is this true Charisse?”

“Yes.” Said after a pause. A slap on two little hands, those not held in empathetic comfort.

“You do not touch anything unless I tell you to. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“I swear. You don’t listen to anything I say.” Angry giant footsteps retreating, pouring a cup of coffee, steaming. “You know what, go to your room, both of you, and lay on your beds. And the first one to make a peep gets my foot up their ass.”

The patter of child feet, forlorn, marching to the beat of angry silence. Their hands remained joined until they were forced to let go by the distance between their beds, one on each wall, and the softening glare on their backs.

After half an hour had passed, Seth returned to the doorway to tell the girls they could get up. They were both asleep.

III

My brother received a scholarship to play football at the state university, but after the first year he was cut loose for poor grades. Frankly, considering it now, I think he missed living in a small town where everyone knew him; where he was somebody. He, like so many star athletes ascending to the college ranks, became suddenly average or, in his case, below average. He did not play a down that first year and likely would have been about as active for the entirety of his college career. He was simply not good enough. But at the time; I, and many people in the town, thought he was the best and considered it an outrage that he was on the bench.

I remember the first time his team played on television. I watched the entire game for sight of his familiar number twenty-five jersey, but when I saw it, another face was behind the mask. The only time I saw him was when the two teams met on the field at game's end and the camera panned back to reveal the entire crowd of players. He was talking to the mascot. I stopped looking after that, but every so often I would catch his face in the background of a shot. He was always sitting on the bench, looking lost.

At home, for holidays and breaks, however, he was the same. He spoke of the football games like they were battles and began the lifelong habit of living in the memories of his glory days of youth. No doubt, had he remained in college, he would have made those years also sound triumphant, despite the nonexistent role he was set to play. And so he found himself, a year removed from high school, standing at the gates of the paper mill, ready to gradually settle into a life of alcohol, hard work and reminiscence.

He still lived with us, although he was rarely home. When he was, he was usually sleeping or arguing with my father, who still believed his son could be a star in college. He was disappointed, and although he never stated it in such plain words, my brother was quite aware of his feelings. Only my mother's efforts kept the two from becoming estranged, either by blows or silence.

I suppose those were the years my brother fell from his high place in my eyes. I was young, full of dreams and imaginations, while he, though still youthful, had become ordinary. He walked as though a man that had already lived every worthwhile moment of his life and now moved through the actions simply because he had no choice but to exist.

I recall one Saturday, when I was yet fourteen, returning home to find my brother on the couch, drunk, watching his former teammates move across the screen. He cursed as before I had never heard a man curse, and as his rageful eyes caught my presence at the door, he uprose from his sloth and chased me about the house until he caught and tackled me. My head crashed against the stairs, and he sat upon me as we slid down, slowly, to the bottom step. He remained on my back a few moments, silent, and then left the house, slamming the door behind him. That was the first time he struck me.

IV

Charisse stirred from her bed and, with a cautious look toward the open door, tiptoed to her sister. For a moment she watched the rise and fall of Gilda's chest before climbing to her side and drifting off to sleep, her head resting warmly on her sister's outstretched arm, which gradually wrapped her in loving embrace. They lay like that for some time. Unconscious smiles grew and fell on their slumbering faces, glimpses, perhaps, into their individual worlds of dream. Then there was a knocking at the door.

"Get up." Seth's voice gradually faded into their respective dreams. Gilda's eyes opened first, and as she rubbed the final specks of slumber from her eyes, her father came into view leaning against the doorway with an unusually soft look upon his face. She sat up and roused her sister with a gently shake. "It's time for dinner." Seth added before turning from the room.

Gilda immediately jumped from the bed and followed her father, but Charisse lingered a moment in the room to look out the window into the back yard. She had dreamed of a dog playing in the bushes by the fence, back when she was very little, and was attempting to recall whether that was a memory or merely a dream.

"Did I ever have a dog?" She asked her father as she approached the dinner table.

"We had a dog," Seth answered as he set three bowls of macaroni and cheese on the table. "His name was Scooter. He was a pain in the ass, always chewing things, and the barking. That dog never shut up."

"I liked him." Gilda added. "He was funny. I remember playing with him. He used to knock me down sometimes, but I still liked him."

"Eat over your bowl." Seth admonished Gilda who, in her excitement of recollection, had spilled a few noodles on the table.

"What happened to him?" Charisse asked.

"After your mother..." Seth's voice trailed off for a moment. "We gave him away. He was too much of a hassle."

"Did mommy like him?" Charisse said with a serious look on her face.

"Yes." Seth answered. "Now finish up. That's enough talking." And with that, he carried his dish into the kitchen. "What do you want to drink?"

"Milk please." Gilda answered.

"Nothing." Charisse added with a dejected voice. Her eyes were turned down, and she stirred her meal with her spoon.

"What?" Seth called loudly.

"Nothing please." She repeated.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"You'd better be because I'm not getting up again." He placed Gilda's milk on the table. "When you finish put your dishes in the kitchen. Charisse, stop

playing with your food.” Charisse let her spoon fall in the dish. “That’s it; you’re done. Go put your bowl on the counter.” Charisse slowly complied and walked with drooping shoulders to the kitchen. “And quit it with your attitude. You know I don’t put up with that.”

“Yes daddy.” She replied and then turned her steps to her bedroom.

“Where are you going?” Seth called toward her retreating figure.

“I’m tired.” She answered without turning. She heard his footsteps behind her but was surprised by the strong grasp of his hand on her elbow as he yanked her toward his bowing face.

“You do not walk away from me. Understand?” She nodded her head in affirmation. “Now, where are you going?”

“To bed.” Her eyes locked themselves on the ground. Seth dropped her arm and firmly grasped her chin between his thumb and forefinger. She squirmed as a natural reaction and then became motionless, silent.

“Look at me when I talk to you.” Her eyes met his. They were vacant, as if she had gone to another place; one where Scooter still romped about the back yard and her father, not her mother, had died.

His eyes were of sternness, and he gazed into hers for a dozen seconds before releasing her chin. “Now, if you go to bed, you go to bed for the rest of the night. I don’t want to see you up again.”

“Okay.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight daddy.”

She walked to her bed and crawled beneath the covers without changing into her pajamas. As soon as she knew her father was gone, she buried her face in her pillow and began to cry.

V

I am not sure why, but I never fought back against my brother. After awhile I even stopped running. It wasn’t as though he attacked me every time we were alone, but it was generally about once a month that he tracked me down, tackled me and punched or kicked me a few times. That was it. Usually he was drunk.

He never hurt me too bad; never touched my face or left bruises too big, but he made me hate and fear him. I suppose loathing is the most accurate term to describe my feelings toward my brother at that time. Even when he was friendly, which was not so rare as it seemed then, I loathed him. His smile always seemed to breathe brutality and superiority, like he believed himself the quintessential man for his unbounded ability to physically overwhelm a fifteen year old man-child with his twenty-two year old, factory built, forearms and size twelve feet.

But the day came that I had enough, and when he sprang upon me, I did not move until he came in close and released a weak uppercut to the bottom of his jaw. For a moment he fell back with a look of shock on his face. He moved his jaw and felt it with his fingertips, and then his eyes filled with rage and he thrashed me worse than ever he had before. But that was it. He never laid another hand on me.

VI

Charisse felt a warm body beside her, and then a soft hand gently rubbed her back and filled her with the half forgotten feeling of love. She smiled and nestled against the welcoming palm. She then uprose and embraced the warm bosom of her dream, gazing with radiant eyes upon her mother's departed, placid, face. They shared a smile; the smile Charisse had always known and would always remember in her subconscious as the essence of her mother. And then they were walking along a path covered in the white hair of a thousand dandelions. Orange and red leaves fell upon them and seemed to dance on the soft, warm, breeze which seemed to follow in their steps. Then, from behind, there joined their happy stroll a puppy of golden hair and joyous disposition. He rubbed against Charisse's leg, and she giggled, let go her mother's hand and played with him. Then they were walking again, the three of them, into the thickest of the trees where the dandelions ceased and the ground was black. She clutched her mother's hand tighter, but it was gone. She turned about, searching, seeking her in the steps they had tread, but she had vanished and taken with her the furry companion who once walked by her side. Everything was black. Everything was cold, alone. She began to weep. Then in the darkness there was a sound. She strained her eyes in search of something, anything. She searched in vain. Then in her palm was a familiar touch, and she sighed with hope.

"I'm so glad you're here." She said to her sister's welcome face. "I was so alone." Gilda bowed close and kissed her on the cheek. She then looked her sister directly in the eyes and smiled.

"I must go." She said.

"Do not leave me." Charisse replied.

"I have no choice. Where I go, it is not yet time for you to follow."

Then there was an angry shout in the blackness, and Gilda was wrenched screaming from her sister's side, and Charisse screamed too, so loudly that it awakened her conscious self to the fact that she was screaming in her sleep.

VII

I was sixteen the last time my brother hit me, and while I believe the precedent I set by finally standing up for myself contributed to his peaceful turn, the truth is, about the same time a much more important event occurred in his life. He became a father, or more accurately, he learned that he was to be a father. He was entirely unprepared.

But despite the fact the mother was a stranger, a girl he met at a party and with whom he had spent one drunken night of passion, he proposed to her, and she, not without her reservations, accepted.

She was beautiful; more beautiful than ever a beast such as my brother deserved, but she acted under the belief that it would be best for her daughter, so their child was, to be raised in a complete home. She had grown up in the shattered duality of divorce and desired with her full heart to give her child a better example from which to learn about life.

She was only twenty when they were married, closer to my seventeen years than my brother's twenty-four, and that, I suppose is one of the reasons she and I became such close friends. More so, our personalities connected, and I always believed, as I still do, had we met a few years later, we might have ourselves been married. And I always felt that the same thought had crossed her mind, but never would we speak or seriously think of such a thing for the bond which brought our similarities to light was her children, especially her second daughter, whom resembled her mother both in look and personality. I spent many days watching this child learn to live; to crawl, walk and speak. When she first ran, her mother called me to share the news, and I genuinely was so excited that I rushed to their home and ran all day beside the child, laughing with her mother and playing with her older sister. Her father, my brother, was at work, then at a bar until eleven at night. When he came home, the children were asleep, and his wife and I were chatting over a cup of tea in the dining room, waiting for his return. She told him of the child's progress, and he, with a grunt only slightly more positive than indifference, said that he was going to bed and asked his wife if she would be joining him any time soon.

We wound up speaking until three in the morning; of dreams, the future of her children and our own childhoods; memories we had forgotten until that very moment of when we were but three or four and the world seemed such a large, wonderful, irreverent place. That was the last time I saw her alive.

At her funeral, as I stared at her beautiful, lifeless, face, her words from that night darted through my mind.

"I love my daughters," she said, "more than I believed I could ever love anyone, yet for their father, I feel nothing. I used to wonder how these wonderful children, with such beautiful personalities, were ever bred from him, but now that I know you better, I understand. I will be quite proud if they turn out as well as you."

“They will be better.” I said with a conscious smile, which she returned for a short while before turning more serious than I believe I had ever witnessed.

“If anything happens to me,” she said, “please look in on them and help them with anything they might need.”

Her eyes seemed to stare into my soul, searching more there within than in the answer from my lips.

“I will.” I answered.

The piercing look softened, and she said with a squeeze of my hand, “Thank you.”

And thus I parted from her, the image forever in my mind of her relieved face as she said those words, as if she knew, somehow, that fate had placed death on her next day’s path and that, now she had found someone she could trust, so she believed, to protect her children, she could meet the oncoming change without fear or regret. Obviously, she did not foresee the way things would turn out.

XIII

While her sister went to bed, Gilda made her way to the toy box and retrieved three stuffed animals; a moose, a bear and a penguin. She sat in the middle of the living room and began to play, imagining the three were on a journey to a far away land full of strange creatures and a princess, herself, locked in a tower whom they might rescue. The bear rode the moose, while the penguin waddled along beside or sometimes flew overhead, spinning about the air in a series of flips and dives. It was in one of these flips that the bird’s silhouette crossed the television screen and sparked Seth’s ire. Admonished, Gilda retired to her room and continued the fantasy, leading the travelers through the hills and valleys carelessly created in the folds of a tussled bedspread. At last they reached the castle, and after a perilous battle with the polka dotted dragons of her mind, they rescued the princess who, in celebration, let loose with a joyous dance, enhanced fully in its loftiness by the bed springs and the flying penguin crashing into the ceiling a half a dozen times. Yips of excitement escaped her mouth, louder and louder until she burst into laughter and spun about the bed in a dizzy bout of uncontrolled childness. Then a yank on her arm, a crash and the awakening screams of Charisse.

IX

I heard the screams before I reached the front door and rushed through without knock, sprinting down the hallway until I reached the girls’ room, where my heart, as well as my feet, stopped.

Charisse still screamed, sitting upright in her bed with terror in her eyes. Gilda's body lay motionless on the ground, a small pool of blood, the tiniest bit, forming at the nostrils of her pretty nose. Seth, meanwhile, stood facing his screaming daughter, a blank stare on his face of a man that has gone to another place; one where Gilda still romped about the house and no one, instead of his daughter, was dead; one in which he did not yank quite so hard or fail to catch her in her fall, as it would forever seem he might have done.

Charisse stopped screaming, and I walked to her bed and gathered her in my arms.

"It was an accident." Seth managed to say. Otherwise he had not moved.

I brushed past him, carrying Charisse, her face buried in my chest, and called the police. When they came, my brother was still standing in the same place, the same mute stare on his face.

X

It was four months before my brother spoke again, and another year after that before he left the psychiatric hospital, or so my parents told me. As I said, it had been eighteen years from that day when I found myself in a small bar watching my brother and his friends chatter in the mirror. They spoke a little of work, complaining about their boss and the unfairness of their post in life. Then they told stories of their triumphs in life. My brother talked about the high school football game he scored four touchdowns. His face radiated with pride. It made me wonder, the way he recalled that time, and the content of his conversation, if he ever thought about his wife and daughters or whether, once they were gone, he gradually blocked away their memory.

I threw the bartender a few dollars for a tip and left the bar. I did not want to talk to him, nor do I think I will ever try again. I went that time only to tell him my daughter, his daughter, had been married. I thought he might like to know she was happy, but seeing him, observing his actions and words, I realized the part of him which might have cared was still locked, somewhere in his mind, in the blank stare of a man that has killed his own child.

The Final Option of Peace

The President entered the room stiffly and shook hands with the Prime Minister. He looked him over, into his eyes, but he sensed no threat.

“Okay.” Said he. “Everyone can go.”

Everyone left the room except the two heads of state. A video camera recorded their actions and conversation, but it was not live.

“Please, sit.” Said the Prime Minister. He offered the President coffee and poured himself a cup as well. They then sat across from each other at a small table covered with hors d’oeuvres. “You may begin.”

“I yield to you.” Said the President. “You called this meeting.”

“Yes.” The Prime Minister paused, weighing his words. “Peace must be given one last chance. Do you not agree?”

“It will not hurt.”

Thus they began, Prime Minister and President, their nations on the narrow edge of war. The lands had been at peace for generations, but they had recently verged along different paths of government and ideology. The President’s nation was aggressive. The Prime Minister led a nation on the brink of isolation. The issues that led to this juncture might be anything. Perhaps the Prime Minister’s government was too lax on trade. Perhaps companies in his nation produced the same products for less than the companies in the President’s nation. Maybe they ignored trade names and copyrights to make and sell products more inexpensively. Maybe it was merely ideological; the government of one so vehemently against the form of the other’s government, irregardless of whether it was successful. Perhaps there was a drought, or the President’s land needed more resources. Great are the excuses nations use to propagate war. The cause of this is irrelevant; what mattered to the Prime Minister was that there were troops on his border and that the President’s words in public sought blood. Thus, he called the meeting, merely the two of them, alone, videotaped for historical sake and, no doubt, propaganda uses for both sides.

“What do you seek?” The Prime Minister asked bluntly. He searched the face of the President for kindness, compassion; humanity. He was not sure if it was there.

“Peace; the same as you.”

“Please speak plainly. There is no one here to win over. There is no press. The eyes of the world cannot see you. If you wish we can turn the video off.

Let us speak as two reasonable men, not as children. You say you want peace, why then are your troops on our border?"

"To protect our way of life."

"Are we a threat? Do our troops march toward you?"

"Your nation is a threat as it now stands. I will not sit idly by and watch my country be degraded by yours."

"What have we done that angers you so?"

Here the President laughs and proceeds with rage to describe how he perceives the aforementioned faults of his neighbor; how the businesses of his nation are losing money to foreigners or how he cannot allow for such a degenerate state to exist beside his.

"Yes," he says finally, "I will remove your government by force if you do not resign your power immediately. I cannot allow you to maintain hold over your people. They must be set free."

"They are free," replies the Prime Minister, "at least as free as any other nation; more so, I believe, than the citizens of your nation. Are they tyrannized? No. You would fight a war; you would sacrifice the lives of young men from both our nations in order to replace our system with yours simply because you believe it is better?"

"Yes," replies the President, "as many as it would take. You disgust me."

"Thus the true reason arises. Is that really worth the loss of even one life?"

"You will fall, and with you the false ideals you carry with you."

"Then peace is inconceivable?"

"We will destroy you. Surrender now if you wish to save the lives of your men. Mine are willing to die if duty so calls."

"Then I am afraid you leave me no choice."

"You will surrender?"

"You will force war?"

"Yes."

A single gunshot pierces the skull of the President. The Prime Minister calmly sets a pistol on the table and turns to the video camera.

"To this end was I led to prevent war. This man was willing to sacrifice the lives of many to further his own goals, or perhaps the goals of a few. I am not. If but one soldier lives because of this action, it has been worthwhile. But pray, citizens of this man's nation, take vengeance for his death not upon my nation. I alone am responsible, and I yield myself to you. Should you consider it murder, I will abide by your will. Should you consider it the first and last death of a war that should have never been fought, I, again, will abide by your will."

The doors to the room burst open with a flood of security personnel, but no one takes steps to confine or injure the Prime Minister. The President's body is surrounded by his men. The Prime Minister rises from his seat and turns for the door but pauses once more to look at the camera.

“Again, citizens of this man’s nation, judge me alone for this event. Judge and sentence me as you see fit. When this sentence is announced, I will abide by it. Until that time, I have a country to run.”

The Unquenchable Art

My name is Jean Baptiste. I live in a world without art.

I made a painting once. It was beautiful, but they took it from me. They burned it, and I could do nothing as I watched months of joyful labor dissipate into smoke. I could not scream. I could not defend myself. They would never understand, those lifeless eyes which held me and lit the fire. They did not know what it was like to create. They could never know how happy I felt when I was alone with my painting.

I made a brush from my hair. The paint was made from pigments of flowers, of mud and anything else that fit the use. I walked by the paint store and dreamed of the many cans I would take if somehow I found myself, unwatched, within. If only I had a permit to buy paint, but only house painters receive those. Nonetheless, I created. In the middle of the night, while my roommate slept, I crept into the bathroom, beneath the window where the streetlight shone. I painted the moon. I dreamed. I imagined myself in a place I have never been, sitting, just sitting, beneath the hollow moonlight. Long grass shuffled in the wind, and the world smelled of freedom.

I hid my painting in the bathroom wall; where the drywall has long been rotten, behind the cabinet where I kept my clothes. Beneath the moon I painted a tree. I do not know what kind it was, but its branches were dead and leafless. Beneath the tree a pond arose almost by itself, and its dark waters reflected the silvery moon. I was pleased and for a time painted no more but rather spent the midnight hours gazing upon the beautiful world I had created. Then one day I saw a young girl. She seemed sad, and her image remained with me until that night. I quivered as from my rude brush her tragic likeness flowed beside the reflecting pond. When I finished, I stared at the scene and wept. It was complete. It was powerful. How could anyone, I thought, forbid such art as this?

For only three nights did I gaze upon my complete creation for, on the fourth, they came to my room, to my bathroom and from behind the cabinet, from within the wall, produced my masterpiece. Never had it looked so pure as when they held it before me in the full light of the room. I gazed at it with pride. They asked if it was mine. How could I deny what had become the most important part of me? I said proudly that it was. They carried it before me, rolled in a cruel creature's hand, as I was led to a magistrate whom again asked whether it was mine. Yes; oh blessedly yes. My roommate was called to my condemnation. He had found the accursed thing; he actually called my beautiful

painting an accursed thing. I wanted to pummel him, not so much for betraying me as for those words. I only glared.

They led me to the plaza, where a crowd had been assembled, and before all these people gave me my beloved painting and told me to burn it. I refused. I was told that if I did not, they would and I would be imprisoned. I would not strike the match. The crowd screamed coarse words. I did not care. I would not burn it. A man, unseen, hit me from behind with a stick. The crowd bellowed in approval. I fell to my knees, clutching my art to my breast. The stick broke upon my back, and I was again told to set flame to my painting. I said nothing, and the picture was torn from my desperate grasp. The sound of a match. The cackling of strangers, idiots. A musty boot pushing me to the ground. Tears. Fire. Smoke. The man was laughing as he held the burning painting. I ceased to cry and closed my eyes. I smiled. In the darkness of my mind I found the moon, the tree and the girl beside the pond. I realized then that no matter what they did, no matter how they abused me, my art would remain within. And surely I was not alone. Eventually the world would change, and then art would be free to exist outside the dark corners of society and within the beautiful, creative mind which it seemed I had been blessed enough to receive.

For three months my body rotted in a dreary cell, but in that time; such dreams did cross behind my eyes. And when at last I was set free, I again began to collect pigments, as well as hair for a new brush. They gave me a new job, a new room and a roommate who looks at me with suspicion, but irregardless, I have again taken up my brush and set about to create. I saw the same girl again. This time she was smiling. I think I will paint her again; in the daylight, running through that strange field of wind blown grass which finds its way into my dreams. I picture her laughing, dancing; happy beyond anything I have ever witnessed. And, sometimes, when I consider this image, I am there too.

Josie's Forgotten Friend

I

“Sit down. Stand up. Lay down. Sit up. Stand. Sit. Lay. Stand. Good. Have a treat. Now go play.”

The child ran out the open door to join four others in a small yard enclosed by a brick fence.

“He’s coming along nicely.” The teacher said to her assistant as they moved to the next yard. It also contained five children, and they ran to the glass as the teacher appeared. She flipped the intercom switch.

“Sit!” She said loudly, and the children obeyed immediately. “Josie, stand. Come.” Two girls stood. The assistant shocked one with a metal pole, and the girl sat back down. Josie reached the teacher. “Inside.” The girl obeyed. “Sit.” The assistant withdrew a vial of the girl’s blood, checked her eyes, ears and mouth, and then the teacher ordered her through a series of commands before releasing her to play. Josie ran outside and rolled on the grass, laughing at the ticklish feeling on her naked skin. A few minutes later she was joined by another girl, and they began to frolic about, chasing each other in turns, wrestling and laughing. Another girl and a boy joined them after a few minutes, but the fifth child, the girl that had been disciplined, had not returned when the glass door closed shut.

It was not until some hours later that Josie noticed she was gone. The two of them normally napped together in one of the corners of the yard, wrapped in each other’s arms. She went to her corner and whimpered for awhile before falling asleep. She awoke later and looked around for her friend. She had still not returned. Josie walked to the far corner where the other children slept and curled up beside them to sleep. The next morning a new girl was brought into the pen. After a few days Josie had forgotten completely about the missing girl.

II

“She’s received all her shots?” The doctor asked.

“Yes.” The teacher replied.

“Spayed?”

“Not yet. She’s only seven.”

“Still a year or two then. I was hoping it was just a reaction to that. It’s quite common for them to act a little off for a few weeks after being spayed or neutered. But this seems much worse.”

“What is it doctor?”

“Free will.”

“But how? She was fine until a week ago.”

“That’s how it usually is. She is a little young though, or too old. Usually they act up right at birth or not until the early teens. Unfortunately, it’s something we can’t predict. At least when they’re infants we can pull them out of the program. But once they’re this old we have no choice but to euthanize.”

“It seems wasteful. Is there no alternative?”

“We’ve tried. The problem is she’s too much like us to be one of them, but too much like them to be one of us. In either situation she would be miserable. If we tried to make her live like a slave, she would rebel and suffer from a perceived injustice against herself and her kind. It would be disastrous. The entire reason this system works is that the slaves do not realize they are slaves. They are raised from birth to do only what we tell them so that by the time they are adults they do not take time to consider their lives. You know this. That is why they are raised in groups of five and why we spay females after they give birth to one child and the males either at age two or after they have impregnated the four females in their group. We form them and prevent any extraneous stimuli from disturbing their minds. Still this happens sometimes. Just as you or I might sire a brute, brutes occasionally sire intelligent, free willed beings. Like I said, if we catch it early enough, they are raised like you and I, but when they are this old, it is too late. She has too much of the slave in her to live like us. She would feel pity for the slaves. Again, if she is allowed to live in either caste, she is a risk to the very fabric of society. Do you understand now?”

“Yes, I believe so. Thank you doctor.”

“You’re welcome. Bring the child in now.”

III

The girl, whom after being shocked a second time by the teacher’s assistant had attacked the assistant, lay strapped to a table as the doctor swabbed her arm in preparation for the needle. She did not understand what was going on. She understood very little. The words the doctor used were foreign for in her seven years she had been taught but a few dozen commands.

But she felt that something was wrong. She had felt the feeling quite often in recent days. If she had any vocabulary at all, it could be said that she had begun to think, but as she knew no words, she had only the thoughts unattached to language. Her mind had stirred. She had gazed upon the wall and considered, felt, that there was more beyond it. When the glass door opened the

first time after this, she had attempted to rush through it. She was shocked and did as she told for the remainder of the day.

The next day, while the teacher and her assistant watched the children playing through the door, she had left the play and stared at them. She watched their mouths move and recognized one or two words. The intercom clicked on, and she was told to go play. She did not move. The door opened, and she was shocked again. She began to play, and as she did she began to feel once again that something was not right.

Then this day, she stood when she had not been ordered to. She was going to walk through the door then, but again she had been shocked. She waited until she was called inside, and then she attempted to run down the hall. The assistant had grabbed her by the arm and shocked her. She, in return, bit the assistant's arm and kicked at her shins. The teacher had injected her with a drug that made her sleep.

When she awakened, she found herself bound, seated on the floor of a strange place. The assistant sat in a chair beside her. The girl had never seen a chair before. She struggled at her shackles, but it was to no use. She tried to stand up, but the assistant pushed her back on the ground. Then the teacher had taken her to the doctor and lain her on the table. She managed to bite the teacher in the process. They strapped her down, and she soon realized it was useless to struggle so she lay motionless, staring at the ceiling, a vague sense of injustice forming in her wordless mind. Then the needle prick on her arm, and soon she was falling into the deathly arms of sleep.

Atlantis (Inspired by a Dream)

or

A Future that Shall Never Be

Chapter One

The World, a Brief History, 2025 – 2125

How the world has changed these past hundred years, perhaps more so than during any century in the history of man. It is not that man has changed, the simple individual creature that is, but merely the way in which he aligns, feeds and governs himself. His wars continue, but they are great struggles of machinery in which few men die. These wars, however, while they have played a significant role in the evolution of this century, pale compared to the changes generated by peace. Yes, in 2025, the European Union was a fledgling nation, but the lingering nationalism of its member states had yet to be erased. Yes, even then the Islam world was beginning to reconstruct itself after its decimation by the United States in the first decades of the twenty-first century, but it was far from the Confederated Islamic Empire which spreads its wings from Europe's border to the deep Pacific islands. Russia and China were not then the enemies they have become, each greedily peering across the other's borders, striking, retreating, apologizing, attempting to forget. It has been that way since 2043 when Russia, desperate for funds, leased to China for fifty years a great expanse of Siberia. In 2093 the Chinese would not leave, and the two have cursed each other since. Many times has the world held its breath as the troops of these nations stood border to border while the minister's exchanged threats. There have been battles, but the war has yet to come. Nearly everyone is afraid that when it does, the world will be dragged into the battle for there is little chance that the three great powers would leave the two to fight alone.

But this fear has been with man ever since the atomic bombs struck Japan and the United States and the Soviet Union played their fifty-year game of atomic chess. How oft it seemed the United States would bring the Europe to fight when it successively removed the existing governments in Afghanistan, Iraq, Assyria, Iran, Lebanon, Pakistan, Libya, Somalia, Turkmenistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. At that time, however, the United States enjoyed an unparallel opportunity to adjust the world as it saw fit, irregardless of how its actions were perceived by the remainder of the world. Its brashness peaked in 2038 when it annexed by force all lands in Mexico north of the twenty-sixth parallel, including the entire Baja peninsula. The world cried outrage for that action, and while the government changed hands in the next elections, the United States never returned the land. In 2042, it built a forty-foot wall to separate itself from Mexico. The wall remains, and Mexico has sunk even further into poverty, while the United States remains strong.

The European Union has grown strong. In 2026, Great Britain formally became part of the alliance, and in 2054, the nation officially became one, rather

than the association of many smaller nations. In 2087, it welcomed Australia to its union, and in 2100, Canada, who had for half a century sided in all things with the union, likewise joined. The European Union has remained peaceful for nearly one hundred years, although its presence influences most actions of governments throughout the world.

The Islamic Empire first formed in 2040 as the Islamic Democratic Federation. The inaugural members were Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Syria. By 2100, when it officially became the Confederated Islamic Empire, it included what used to be Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Morocco, Myanmar, Oman, Pakistan, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Yemen. Indonesia became part of the empire in 2111. In 2085, India, unwilling to face an overpowering foe, ceded nearly a third of its northern territory to the Islamic Democratic Federation. The Islamic Empire has flourished.

The loss of its northern lands has been the least of India's problems. Simply, its people are dying. In 2041 a mutation of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, AIDS, appeared both in India and in South Africa. It apparently was formed by an experimental treatment for the original AIDS virus which had been approved for use on the infected of both nations. Even at that time, sub-Saharan Africa's population was declining from the original virus, but with the outbreak of the new strain, which was able to survive for a time outside the body and spread like the flu, death claimed itself both India and the Dark Continent. Fortunately, the disease has not spread to the rest of the world. Unfortunately, India and sub-Saharan Africa have become essentially quarantined and, worse yet, have experienced unimaginable loss of life. In India, between 2041 and 2075, two hundred fifty-seven million people died. Between 2075 and 2125, another 318 million. In Africa, where the health care system has been in even worse repair, loss has been as high as ninety percent in some nations. In Angola the population peaked at 13.5 million in 2018. In 2041 it was 12.2 million. In 2075 it had dropped to 3.4 million, and by 2125 it seemed to have leveled somewhere around 1.4 million. South Africa peaked at 48.6 million. In 2125 it stands at 6.3 million. Similar numbers cover the continent. The total number of dead will never be known. It may have been worse, however, if not for the creation manna.

It was in 2043 that a Belgian scientist revealed to the world a concentrated cube of food, one inch per side, that contained the sustenance equivalent to a single, full, meal. It was the miracle the world needed to counteract the spread of death. Factories in all nations were quickly built, and the production of manna, so named by aid workers conducting airdrops over the infected African nations, soon eradicated any possibility of widespread hunger throughout the world. Never would it replace the regular fare, it did not so please the tongue, but for convicts, soldiers and starving men throughout the world, it found a regular place upon the menu.

In 2094, manna received its companion in the form of concentrated water pills. These half-inch by quarter-inch gel pills, called simply “water”, amazingly supplied the body the equivalent of ten ounces of water. These too became mass produced and inexpensive. So it was by the year 2100 that a man could live healthily, if he so desired, on but three manna and six to eight water a day. It was also in the year 2100 that the world saw its last war, with exception of the brief skirmishes between Russia and China. For twenty-five years has peace ruled. A continent and a subcontinent are dying, but in the rest of the world, prosperity rules. Science makes leaps with every cycle of the sun. The arts surge with unprecedented funds. People live longer. They age less. It seems as if man is on the verge of recreating himself.

Chapter Two

Atlantis

In 2071, the European Union granted, for his unparalleled contribution to mankind, the Belgian creator of manna ownership of the two westernmost islands of the Azores, with the understanding and monetary assistance to create on this island an autonomous state consisting of a hand picked scientific and learned community. Construction began the following year and finished in 2080, during which time the Belgian selected fifteen thousand individuals to live on his islands, along with their families. In 2081, twenty four thousand eight hundred and twenty-three men, women and children arrived in the new nation dubbed, appropriately, Atlantis.

It was an incredible achievement; a shining example of the increasing ingenuity of mankind. Erased were the crude buildings of the islands, some built as far back as the seventeenth century. A few of the oldest, finest, remained. An old church, built in an unknown era, was refurbished and turned into a general worship center for all faiths. The rest, however, was new. Five square miles on the larger, southernmost, island, where Santa Cruz das Flores used to stand, were flattened and manufactured into a city capable of holding fifty-thousand citizens. The buildings were grand, surfaced almost exclusively in stone, glass and solar panel. Trees and hanging gardens abounded. There were no roads, as on the island were removed all automobiles. Moving sidewalks moved people about the town, while a small train encircled the island, allowing complete access to the airport, harbor and other facilities located along the shore. The remainder of this island was for recreation; for strolls, horse riding, archaeology and other leisurely activities.

The smaller, northern, island was used exclusively for scientific research, especially in such fields potentially harmful to humans. Here was the foremost laboratory for disease research, including on the deadly AIDS mutation. The island was quarantined, and to exit each individual was thoroughly scanned for disease. Had any such virus spread on this island, the workers were resigned to remain, even unto the death.

The ten miles between the islands was crossed by a unique train tunnel which exteriorly rode the waves throughout all weather, while the tracks within remained level and the small train sped back and forth every five minutes. Such was the technology of Atlantis. Its power was the sun, while its water originated in the ocean, a technique which had been perfected in the 2060's. The small amount of waste that was not recycled was likewise returned to the ocean, after an extensive disinfecting process that created a product quite similar to ordinary dirt.

The lives of the citizens were also greatly altered compared to the nations from which they came. First of all, they lived essentially without money. As every citizen, or at least one in every family, contributed in some way to the common good of mankind, the three powers of the world saw fit to extol gratuitously upon Atlantis the use of whatever raw materials it might need, as well as an annual supply of food well apportioned to support not only the populace of the island but such visitors as might arrive, such as the many politicians of the donor nations. The island also enjoyed a reprieve from many of the international laws limiting the free exchange of information. The entertainment computer, to which all citizens had unrestricted access, except where age pertained, contained every movie, television show and book ever produced, such as most technologically current nations. Unlike other nations, the citizens of Atlantis could access this information without membership or usage fees. Atlantis scientists were also given unprecedented access to the technology abounding on the globe, so that they might dissect and improve upon it. Only the United States did not require its businesses to share technology which might benefit the world.

Atlantis was governed by a council of ten Elders, elected yearly by citizens above the age of eighteen whom had resided in the country for at least three years. At their head was the Minister, also elected yearly. All citizens over the age of thirty, having resided on Atlantis for at least ten years were considered eligible for election to each of these posts. Each citizen within this category was likewise listed on the yearly ballot, from which each voter chose ten people. The citizen with the most votes became the Minister, while the next ten became Elders. If anyone refused the post, which was rare, the person with the next most votes would take his place. The same replacement procedure stood in place if ever it happened that an official failed to complete his or her year in office. Campaigning was forbidden; thus both the Minister and the Elders were generally chosen for their high estimation throughout the public. The Belgian was Minister for the first thirteen years of Atlantis' existence and would have

likely remained so had he not refused the post. He was by then ninety-one years old. Four years later he died, and in what has become a tradition in Atlantis, his body was jettisoned into the ocean between the two islands. A bronze statue of the great man stands on the seashore, looking out toward where his body sank beneath the waves.

As would be expected, millions sought to become part of Atlantis, but per the wisdom of the founder, the population was restricted to thirty thousand, with the clause that the population might rise above in time of need or by progeneration. At no point was the population to rise above fifty thousand. As a rule, immigration numbers were limited to equal emigration counts. This generally varied from fifty to two hundred persons each year.

In 2107, one hundred fifty-seven individuals became citizens of Atlantis. Among them was the young family of Jonathan and April Winslow. Jonathan was thirty-four and an archeologist of no great fame. He came only as a husband to April, thirty-two and a brilliant genetic engineer whose ingenious methods had led to the eradication of an unusually deadly strain of the flu virus. She had been brought to Atlantis to join the team still attempting to cure AIDS. With them they brought their five-year-old son, Jonas.

Chapter Three

12:38 PM, Atlantis time, August 6, 2125

Everyone stopped. They stared at the screens on the walls, on their desks, in their hands. Silence hummed through the air. A tear dropped. A thousand tears fell. A million, perhaps billions, of the droplets caressed the cheeks of the stunned populace of earth. The glow of the video remained eerily bright. Eyes looked away. Thoughts stalled. Curses fell from tongues half said, drowned by emotion. Denial shook with the heads of millions. It did not happen. It could not happen. No one would. No one could. But it did. Someone could. But who? Knees grew weak with the full realization of the event. My God, thirty million people. It is impossible. God have mercy on their souls. What do I; what do we? Thirty million. Thirty million. How many times in how many heads did the number repeat, drop, rise and crush the empathizing mind? Thirty million souls that but an hour before had lived and breathed, no doubt striving through the course of their day with no more concern than anyone else had been. And now? Where are they now? My God.

Chapter Four

August 6, 2125

The mushroom clouds scarce had settled before the world witnessed the event. In but minutes the vast centers of metropolis and government, Washington, D.C. and London, had been erased from the face of the earth by two separate nuclear blasts. These bombs had been thought eradicated when in 2076 the United States destroyed what was the last known supply of both enriched uranium and plutonium. But now this. Had not the world witnessed enough death in the last eighty-five years that man needed to also eradicate himself?

Jonas Winslow stared unblinking at the screen as the images poured into his eyes. He had been to Washington once, when he was ten. He remembered walking amongst the monuments. They seemed of such a distant time. How grand Lincoln sat, gazing across the masses shuffling through life, almost as if he was a god waiting to be reawakened at a time most needed. And Jefferson; how his great words seemed to leap from the wall. What he remembered most, however, were the words, "I hate war," inscribed in stone beside a waterfall in the World War II monument. He thought of that war, nearly two hundred years past. He considered the two bombs the nation of his birth had dropped on Japan. How small those losses seemed in retrospect, considering the fifty-five million lives lost in that war. Then he thought of the thirty million now supposed dead and considered for a moment the shuddering thought that in the war to surely come, they might be but a fraction of the lives to end.

"Fellow Americans," An American general was speaking, "I stand before you a broken man. My heart, as no doubt has yours, has been crushed by the senseless events of this day. Never in the history of man has such a foul act of evil been witnessed. Weep my friends, as shall I, for all we have lost this day. Pray for all those that have died and all that have lost someone dear. Do not be afraid to mourn. The time shall come for anger. The time shall come for vengeance. To those responsible for this damnable action, let me say only that you will feel the might of this great nation. You will pay for what you have done." The general paused a moment. Tears rimmed on his eyes. Silence echoed through the room. His eyes dropped from the camera. Compassion would be best to describe the look which formed on his face and remained until he spoke again. "Effective immediately the United States of America is under martial law. All borders are closed. In concert with the European Union, an extensive investigation to find those responsible for this terror is already underway. I assure you, my fellow citizens, that vengeance shall be carried out with haste and precision. May God bless us all."

“General Abraham Matthews,” a reporter said after a moment, “giving the initial American response to the nuclear attack. His message echoes the written statement released by the European Union. Both nations have indicated that their retaliation will be quick and substantial. Although neither nation mentioned whom they believe responsible for the attacks, accusations have already begun to circle the globe. And we have just received a statement from the Confederated Islamic Empire. ‘The Confederated Islamic Empire,’ it reads, ‘extends its sympathy to the United States and the European Union and pledges complete assistance in all facets of recovery in the aftermath of this atrocity.’”

“On the screen now is live video of what was downtown London. I do not think there are words to describe the destruction.” The voice trailed off as the video panned across the desolate rubble which so recently was home to seventeen million people. A helicopter flew by in the background. It seemed to fly awkwardly, as if the pilot could not hold his hand steady in his disbelief. There was an awful glow in the sky, unreal, almost beautiful, but ghastly. Jonas could not look at it without thinking of hell. The image switched to Washington. The clouds were thicker, more wretched looking. On the side of the screen estimates of fatalities were shown. He closed the sidebar so the video filled the entire screen. Then he switched the view to the reporter once more.

“Thus the Infidels burn in hell.” The reporter finished. “Once again, a letter has been released claiming the attacks on Washington and London as ‘the will of Allah’ and ‘the right of all nonbelievers.’ The message is believed to be from within the Islamic Empire, although in what region or by whom is unknown. The message is signed, ‘a servant of Allah.’ And now, yes, we are going to a live response from the Islamic Empire.” The image shifted to a cabinet minister from the empire.

“The Confederated Islamic Empire,” the minister spoke, “is in no way affiliated with the individual or individuals whom claim the tragic bombing of Washington and London to have been carried out as the will of Allah. We have been and seek to remain allies with both the United States and the European Union. We again offer our support for these nations in their time of need. It is indeed a sad day for humanity.”

Jonas turned the screen off and sat silently, wondering if he should return to work. He had already taken nearly a two-hour lunch break, but this day, he knew, such things would matter little. He did not know why, but he felt like taking a shower. He supposed it was to attempt to wash away the images he had witnessed in the past hour. He looked at the clock again and shrugged. Work could wait. A few minutes later he stood in the shower and closed his eyes. In his mind the mushroom clouds arose again, but this time they were in new cities; Paris, Baghdad, Beijing, Moscow, Mexico City; the world was on fire. He grew weak and gradually lowered to the shower floor where he curled in himself in a ball and began to weep.

He sat as such for a time, how long he would never know, before his tears were interrupted by the incessant ringing of the video console in the next room. Slowly he rose to his feet and shut the water off and listened. The ringing stopped for but a moment before beginning again. He quickly redressed and stepped into his bedroom. He did not even have time to check his messages before the screen beeped again. He hit the answer button and the screen revealed his boss's face.

"Jonas, have you seen the latest?" It was not the question Jonas had expected.

"That depends..."

"General Matthews gave another speech; did you see his first?"

"Yes."

"Anyway, he openly accused the Islam Empire for the attacks. It looks like there might be a war, soon. Head down here." The screen clicked off. Jonas sighed. It was a good thing he had a shower; he might not have one for a while.

Jonas worked in the small division of Atlantis' small government that monitored international affairs. Generally, they did little but observe the political movement and troop deployments throughout the world, but this time, if the threat was indeed so imminent, they might have to take part. Officially, however, Atlantis would always remain neutral.

Chapter Five

A Preemptive Strike

From launch pads outside Baghdad and Islamabad, two identical ships lifted into the sky and rapidly ascended into the atmosphere. They converged in low orbit and sped toward one of the three United States space stations orbiting the earth. When they were within two thousand meters of the station, they each fired a single electronic pulse weapon which, striking the station, disabled all electronics onboard.

In the United States, all contact was lost with the station, and by the time the attack had been fully appreciated, the Islamic ships had disabled a second station. En route to the first of two European stations, the ships began targeting satellites of both the United States and the European Union. And, while on the earth these nations scrambled to respond, the ships, after disabling the first European station, had split and approached the final two stations in space, save the lone Chinese outpost orbiting on the far side of the earth.

As three American ships lifted off, the final two stations fell, and the Islamic ships turned to the destruction of satellites. Two European shuttles lifted off in hopes of rescuing the inhabitants of their dead stations before they suffocated. They, unlike the United States and the Islamic Empire, had obeyed the treaty the entire world community had signed in 2063 which banned all weapons from space shuttles, ships, satellites and stations.

From his office Jonas watched sadly as reports of the first space battle filtered in. He had hoped, despite the clamoring of war from the United States, that peace would still prevail, but with the first attack, that small hope had vanished. As he followed the progress of the destruction in space, he felt as if he was watching the beginning of the destruction of earth. They had already run the potential death counts of a war between the Islamic Empire and the combined United States and European Empire. The numbers were astounding. Excluding the approximately thirty million already dead from the nuclear weapons, it was likely that between one hundred million and one billion people might die, depending on the length and severity of the war, as well as how many other nations became involved. And some people felt those numbers were optimistic. The highest estimate Jonas had seen put the death toll at anywhere from one to three billion. Yet the war would still be fought. How could anyone, after seeing estimates even much lower than these, continue on the path to war knowing that so many were about to die?

“The fools!” Jonas’ boss screamed as he entered the office. He had been meeting with the governing council. “They don’t understand what they’re doing.” He slammed a folder on his desk and looked at Jonas. His eyes were full of rage.

“What?” Jonas asked.

“Don’t ask! Although, you’re going to find out anyway.” He brought his chair to Jonas’ desk and sat down. He shook his head. He was a large man, and when he made the motion, it always reminded Jonas of a grizzly bear. “They’re going to try to stop the war.”

“That’s good isn’t it?”

“In theory, yes, but not the way they plan on doing it. Listen,” he drew closer to Jonas, “what I am about to tell you is for your ears only. No one else is told, okay?”

“Of course. It’s not like I don’t know a lot of things I can’t tell anyone.”

“This is different though. It involves you.” Jonas did not answer, except to lean closer to his boss. The man continued. “You’re going to be sent to America in a few days, you and a handful of others. Your job will be to activate a pulse weapon that we secretly built in case of such a situation as this. I do not know exactly where you’re going, but there are enough of these devices to overload nearly every electronic device in the world.

“I don’t understand.” Jonas said after a few moments. “How could Atlantis build such devices without anyone finding out? There must be thousands of them to do what you said.”

“I believe it is only in the hundreds. They are powerful. But, as to how they were built; I am not sure. As I understand it they are all in rural areas, on farms and such and that the land was bought through dummy companies. But, like I said, I don’t know a lot about them. Everything was built before the turn of the century. I only learned about them after I had had this job for five years.”

“So I go to America, activate one of these devices, and then? Walk back?”

“No, of course not. You will be given money to buy a car, or actually a motorcycle would probably be better. When the devices go off, the roads will be cluttered with dead vehicles. I don’t think they understand that completely. Everything is run with electricity. It will all fail. All they think about is that doing this will make the weapons unusable, and that in the chaos the war will be forgotten.” He shook his head again. “Anyway, if you deactivate the solar cell and battery from your vehicle before setting off the device, it should be okay afterwards. Just make sure there is no electricity running through it at all.”

“Why me?”

A message flashed on Jonas’ computer screen summoning him to the council office. A moment later his handheld flashed the same message.

“That would be them.” His boss said.

Chapter Six

The World Silenced

Jonas watched as the American landscape passed outside the train window at nearly eight hundred miles an hour. He was somewhere between Minneapolis and Spokane. It was amazing, he realized, how small the world had grown. It had been less than eight hours since the flight left Atlantis. He had flown into Atlanta, and then taken the train to Minneapolis, switching lines at St. Louis, and then boarded the Seattle line, which would soon be stopping in Spokane, where he would disembark. The farm was about a hundred and twenty miles north of Spokane, a mere forty-five minutes on the speed-controlled highway. He could not help recalling the history lessons of his youth. How marvelous the world would seem to those people that had taken months to reach the west coast in their cattle drawn wagons. Even to the people of the early twenty-first century, before high speed, radio controlled roads had been designed, the speed of travel would be astounding. They used to have to steer all the time, just like it was on

the old, unimproved roads. He would have to drive on some of those. He wondered if he would remember how. It had been some time.

In Spokane he put up for the night at a hotel. He was in no hurry. He still had two days until he had to activate the device. Transportation was not entirely modern elsewhere in the world, and they wanted all the devices to be set off at the same time. It would have been a lot easier if the satellites had not been destroyed. Then they could have been all set off from Atlantis and only a handful of people would have ever known about the weapons. Now that hundreds, at least, knew, the potential for someone to discover Atlantis' handiwork had greatly increased.

The following morning he purchased a motorcycle, as well as enough manna and water to last him a month. He wanted to be sure that, no matter what happened when the device went off, he was prepared. It wasn't until he was cruising along the highway at two hundred miles an hour that he began to wonder what exactly would happen. He had avoided thinking of it before, but when he reached the farm, he had plenty of time to think. It took only an hour to familiarize himself with the machine and verify that it had not been tampered with. After that, he had nothing to do but consider the fact that every facet of life was run by electricity. The roads and automobiles would cease to function. Transportation of food would cease. Production of food, for the most part, would cease. As would communication, heat, water and light. All this to prevent a war. His boss was right; it was foolish. But would it save lives? That he could not say. How long would it take to get things going again, at least the necessities? Many such questions coursed through his mind, but in none of his thoughts did he consider that he might not activate the device.

The next morning he disassembled the motorcycle until he was positive that there was no energy running through it. By the time he finished this task, only two hours remained before it was time to set off the weapon. He turned on the news on his handheld, and then wondered if he could deactivate it as well. It was probably possible, but he did not know how. So he left it on and listened to reports of the build up for war. There had already been a few skirmishes, but it would probably be another twenty-four hours before the battles began in earnest. Except they would not begin, he thought happily, if everyone else followed through on their mission like he was set to do.

As the time neared, he set the device to automatically execute and walked a few hundred yards from the barn. He was not exactly sure what would happen, but he did not want to be too close to find out. He continued watching television until the screen suddenly went blank. He looked at his watch. It too was a blank screen. Then there was the distant sound of crashing vehicles as relaxing motorists on the highway were transformed into terrified passengers in vehicles which neither steered themselves nor could be steered by the hands of man. Then after a moment there was silence, except for the chirping of a few birds and the rustling of the grass in the wind.

Chapter Seven

Along the Roadside

The motorcycle skidded to a halt, and Jonas fell from the seat to his knees. He had scarce removed his helmet when he began to vomit. It had taken some time, almost twenty minutes, before the full realization that he, Jonas Winslow, was the cause for the terrible sight he had witnessed on the highway before turning onto an old highway.

It was not his fault, he thought. He was, after all, following orders. And, perhaps, the suffering from this event was less than that which the war would have inflicted. Still, those people on the highway were not soldiers. They had no time to flee an advancing army. It was wrong, but so was war. Death was wrong, and he had caused death. Yet it might be worse yet in the days to come.

He sat for no small time on the side of the road. A dust storm kicked up briefly, and the sun burned through the thin layer of morning clouds. He began to sweat. He was miserable and felt as if he deserved to be. He felt like a criminal. A liar. He would never be able to tell anyone. Never. They would kill him, and they would be right to do so. He felt like he deserved to die. Why did he do what they told him? If only he could take it back. But no one ever got that chance.

He looked around at the fields surrounding him. They were empty. A few birds darted amongst the remnant grain stalks and gathered the few fruits the machines had missed. There was a low buzzing of crickets, but otherwise it was quiet. The wind settled.

At length he stood and walked to his motorcycle. He straddled the vehicle but did not turn the key. He looked into the sky, into the empty blue. He wondered if there was a God.

A few minutes later he drove slowly down the road. At the crest of the next hill he again stopped. Near the bottom of the next slope a single car lay on its side, half on the roadside, half in a barren field. He approached cautiously. An arm stood upright against the windshield. The airbags had not worked. They too, Jonas realized, had been foolishly reliant on electricity. They did not used to be, but at the turn of century they had been improved to act before an accident. They had their own power system, but it too had been ruined by the device. That is why the scene had been so brutal on the highway. If the system would have worked very few people would have been hurt. They probably figured it that way.

Jonas stopped adjacent to the wreckage, considering whether or not to investigate. He felt bad even considering passing on, but he did not know what he could do to help the people. They, or at least the one person, seemed

dead, and surely, if anyone was alive they would have climbed out of the vehicle. But it was because of him this person was dead. The least he could do was dig a grave.

Thus he hesitantly walked to the car and peered through the windshield. It appeared to be just the one person, a woman. There was a streak of dried blood on the glass. He scrambled atop the vehicle. It rocked, and for a moment he thought it might tip over. He tried to open both doors, but they were locked. Puzzled, he returned to the ground to study the situation. He looked through the windshield again and noticed the rear window had broken against a rock. If he could tip the car back on its wheels, he would be able to enter.

It turned out to be relatively easy. With only one strong push the vehicle tumbled back to its rightful state, although in the silent air the noise was tremendous. A flock of birds took flight and fluttered over Jonas' head. Instinctively he ducked. He approached the vehicle. Then, as he carefully reached through the shattered glass to unlock the door, he heard a weak moan. Hastily he opened the door and discovered a small girl lodged between the front and back seats, one arm twisted unnaturally beneath her body. She moaned again and attempted to open her eyes as Jonas cautiously lifted her onto the seat. Her small body was warm with fever and dehydration, dried blood covered her face and a large contusion ran just below the hairline. He ran to his motorcycle and retrieved his manna and water. He gave the girl one of each, and then turned to the woman in the front seat. She was dead.

Chapter Eight

An Oasis

“Now stop that.” Lindsay said laughing as a small black lamb, Shadow, butted her gently in the side as she carried a bucket of feed to the chicken yard. The lamb ran off a little distance and began to frolic with his sister, Ghost, whose wool was white. Lindsay watched them play and sighed. It was good to be home.

It had only been three years since she had left the farm, but in those years, she came appreciate her childhood home. It was free. The people there were happy. All of them. It had taken three years to realize that she too had been happy. So she walked away from college and returned to the village she had for years desperately sought to leave forever. It had not changed, except the people were a little older. Children she had grown up with, like she, were now adults. A few

more gray hairs mingled in her mother's hair. Her father seemed to have put on weight. Little things she would not have noticed had she been there everyday.

What struck her first was the silence. That first night she sat on the porch and watched the sunset. The only sound was the wind, save the occasional bird or animal call. Memories flowed. She remembered sitting in the same place the last night before she left. It had not seemed so quiet then, but after three years surrounded by two and a half million people, she no longer noticed the small creaks of the farm or the faint voices of her neighbors. She smiled as she thought of it; there were sixty-two people in the village, and she knew them all. At college, there had been almost four hundred people in her apartment building. She knew maybe ten, and she did not like any of them.

As she scattered the feed amongst the chickens, Lindsay smiled. She found herself thinking of Carl, one of the children she had grown up in the village. He was a year younger than Lindsay, but in her absence, he had changed. He seemed charming in a way no one in the city would have understood. And then she surprised herself by wondering if she would ever marry him. After all, one of the reasons she had gone to the city was to avoid marrying Carl, or Albert, the only two boys her age, other than her cousin Sam. But now, she did not know.

"Lindsay!" Her mother called from the back window of the house. Her voice sounded urgent, troubled. Lindsay set the feed bucket on the ground and ran toward the house. The two lambs ran after her, baaing. At the front of the house was a motorcycle. She hesitated a moment. In the entire village, there were two vehicles, and they were rarely used. That meant a stranger.

Entering through the screen door, she heard her mother talking in her parent's bedroom. Nearing the room she heard a man's voice.

"If you don't mind, ma'am, I'll leave her here for a bit. Her mother was killed in the crash. It's only decent that I get her body."

"Yes, of course. But, let me get you some help. We have a truck. It will be much easier."

"Will the truck work?" Jonas asked.

"I don't see why not." Lindsay's mother answered.

"You don't know then?"

"Oh Lindsay, there you are."

As Lindsay entered her room, she found her mother bent over a small girl, wiping her face with a warm washcloth. The stranger stood on the other side of the bed. Lindsay took her mother's place and began to diagnose the child's wounds.

"My daughter's a nurse." Lindsay's mother said. "The girl will be okay with her. Now let's see about the truck. Oh, what were you saying?"

"Something happened." Lindsay heard the stranger say as they left the room. She turned her attention to the girl. She had a contusion on her head and possibly some internal bleeding.

"She needs to go to a hospital." She told her mother as she returned.

“We can’t take her.” Her mother responded. Lindsay looked up. Her face was ashen.

“What’s wrong?” Lindsay asked. An uneasy feeling stirred within. She had only seen her mother look like that once; when her little brother had been thrown from a horse and badly injured.

“It seems there’s been some kind of attack.” Her mother answered. “He didn’t know exactly what, but he said the highway is covered with accidents. Something messed with the electronics. The van doesn’t work. The truck will, but...”

“Then we can take her to the hospital.” Lindsay interrupted.

“Do you think it would do any good? It’s bound to be overloaded as it is. And the man said he thought the whole area might have been affected. If he’s right, they wouldn’t be able to help her anymore than you can. We have some supplies here, and you’ve been trained.”

“I’ve had classes. I’ve never had to care for anyone like this before. What about Mrs. Pederson? She always looked after us when we were young.”

“You’re right, I’ll get her, but you probably know as much about something like this as she does. She’s never dealt with an auto accident before. And the poor girl looks decimated.” Her mother’s face frowned. “How is she?”

“She’s lost a lot of blood. Her left arm is broken. She has a concussion. Her ribs might be cracked, and she might be bleeding inside. I don’t know.”

“What can you do? I mean; can you save her?”

“It’s too soon. When Mrs. Pederson gets here, we can set the arm. I’ll bandage the head in the meantime, but if she’s bleeding internally, we won’t be able to do anything. If she’s not, she’ll pull through.” She smiled in an attempt to convince not only her mother but herself that she was telling the truth. The smile waned. “Is it true her mother is dead?”

“Yes.”

“And that man; is he the father?”

“No, he just happened by. He seems greatly affected by it though. I’ll go get Mrs. Pederson.”

Lindsay followed her mother from the room and retrieved the first aid supplies from a cabinet in the bathroom. As she bandaged the girl’s feverish forehead, she heard the truck pull up in front of the house. She walked outside in time to watch the stranger, with Carl’s help, lower the body from the bed of the truck. The stranger carried her towards the house, and Lindsay led him to her bedroom where he lay the body on the bed. They covered her with a blanket and returned to the girl just as Lindsay’s mother and Mrs. Pederson entered the house.

“Is she going to be okay?” Jonas asked as he approached the child.

“Yes, I think so.” Lindsay answered. “Now if you don’t mind, we need some room to work. We’ll let you know when you can see her.” She smiled at him as she had at her mother.

“Thank you.” He said and turned toward the door before pausing. “Do you have a wash cloth, or towel? For the mother.”

“I’ll help you dear.” Lindsay’s mother answered and led him from the room.

Chapter Nine

An Oasis, Part II

Jonas stood leaning against a fence at the back of the house, watching Shadow and Ghost playfully knock each other from the top of a large stump. He could not help but feel envy for their ignorant joy.

He had, perhaps half an hour earlier, returned from Spokane with the news that it was implausible to take the child to any hospital in the area. The city was in chaos. The streets were covered with immobile vehicles. It seemed everyone was either injured or helping care for the injured. Everything had been eerily quiet. The only sounds seemed to be the shouts of people as they scrambled about to help each other, save for the cawing of crows and barking of dogs. Nothing worked, and already crowds had cleaned out the grocery stores. Rumors swirled. Law seemed on the tedious edge of failure. When night descended after a few hours, it was impossible to foresee what would happen. Would people rise above themselves and refrain from looting and theft? Most probably would. Most would be too concerned with attempting to surmise the situation, how to deal with it and how to help those who were already suffering. But there would be some that would creep through the dark streets and strike out by their own notions. Already he had seen two men fighting over a box of manna. Another man stood on top of a burned out van and proclaimed that Armageddon had begun. Many people wept. Most fought through crowded streets to reach their homes. Others, knowing they could not reach the suburbs in a single day, sat in their offices and shook their heads in disbelief. Man had suddenly been reduced to himself. Gone were the thousands of machines that had become essential to life. The computers screens were blank. The elevators and moving walkways had stopped. The coffee machines, robots, traffic systems, solar chargers; all were now useless. In many buildings people searched for the ancient, obsolete, articles known as pen and paper. People struggled to open doors to which even the override required an electric device to open. Some people were trapped high in their office buildings. Even had the fire trucks been able to move, their ladders would not ascend. Fire spread in some quarters, sparked by auto accidents and, because the water no longer flowed,

they spread uninhibited. Jonas had noticed the black clouds above the city many miles before he reached the first rows of suburbs. And Spokane was not a large city. What must it have been like in New York, Chicago or Hong Kong? Japan would starve to death. A full third of their citizens consumed manna on a daily basis. In Tokyo fifty-six million people were crammed into hundred story buildings. What would they do without imports?

It hit Jonas suddenly that the entire world, if everything went according to the plan, would by now be diving toward chaos. They had destroyed the infrastructure of humanity.

Ghost rattled against the fence. She propped her forefeet on a horizontal timber and nuzzled against Jonas' stomach. Though he did not feel like it, he could not help but smile and rub the lamb's ears. Shadow jumped up beside his sister, and for a time Jonas lost himself in their simple company.

"We're ready." Carl said as he walked up beside Jonas.

Jonas turned from the lambs and followed Carl to a little cemetery that sat a few hundred yards north of the cluster of nineteen houses. Sam was waiting with three spades, and silently they began to break the ground.

They were nearly finished when two older men approached, leading a donkey pulling a small cart from which, once halted, they lifted a gravestone. Slowly they walked to the edge of the empty grave.

"That should do boys." One of the older men said after they set the stone, upright, a few feet from the hole. "Go and get cleaned up. We'll start in about half an hour." Carl and Sam gathered the shovels and placed them inconspicuously behind the mound of earth before heading back towards the houses. Jonas lingered.

"I wish we knew her name." The other older man spoke after they left. On the gravestone they had etched simply: A MOTHER / DIED AUGUST 11TH, 2125 / MAY HER SOUL REST IN PEACE.

The entire community attended the funeral. A short speech was given by the eldest resident whom, in the days before he founded the community with four other families, had been a preacher. He quoted a few passages from the bible, and then they sang a few psalms. Jonas was tortured. This woman's death was on his head, and as the line of strangers passed by the grave, each dropping a fresh flower on the plain coffin, he began to weep. His body weakened, and he sank to his knees, the entire world for a moment turning black and distant. Then it rushed back. The preacher came to his side and asked if he was okay. He nodded that he was and wiped his eyes as he regained his feet. Soon everyone was gone, and he, with Sam and Carl, covered the grave in the same silence they had created it. After they placed the gravestone, Jonas lay a single flower on the fresh soil.

"God bless." Sam said softly.

"God bless." The other two men repeated. Then they turned from the grave.

Chapter Ten

An Oasis, Part III

“Mommy?” A weak voice broke the blackness. The rustling of a stirring body, and as the plea repeated, an oil lamp lit the room. Lindsay brought her chair closer to the bed and took hold of the child’s hand.

“Where’s my mommy?” The girl asked. Her small face trembled. Lindsay opened her mouth but was unable to form any syllables. Her lips quivered. The girl’s eyes darkened and turned down.

“I’m sorry.” Lindsay said at last, her voice soft with emotion. The girl’s eyes turned toward her.

“Is she in heaven?” She asked.

“Of course.” Lindsay nearly burst into tears.

“Good.” Said the child, and then she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

When she awoke the next morning, she was alone. She looked about the room and wondered where she was. Seeing a window, she began to get out of bed, but stopped when a shooting pain ran up her ribs. She also noticed that her arm was bandaged with a splint. She looked at the window again and slowly rotated her legs out of the bed. She rested for a moment before attempting to stand. She fell back on the bed. She rested awhile longer, took a deep breath and tried again. This time she managed to stand, and after a few shaky steps brought herself to the window. She rested her weight on her good arm against the sill and looked out. She smiled. She had never been on a farm before. And then she laughed as Shadow and Ghost ambled into view, trotting after Lindsay as she headed to the chicken yard. The laughter made her ribs hurt.

After a few minutes, she felt weak and turned to the bed. She halted. A man stood in the doorway, looking at her with soft, sad, eyes.

“Would you like some help?” He asked.

“No, thank you.” She answered and walked gingerly back to bed. After she sat on the edge of the bed, the man entered and sat in the chair beside her. She looked shyly at him and then tried to lift herself into bed. She could not. She looked at him. He smiled meekly.

“Let me help you; just this once.” She did not respond but let him lift her softly into bed. “Are you comfortable?” He asked after he pulled the blankets over her legs.

“Yes, thank you.”

“And how do you feel?”

“My head hurts, and my ribs.”

“I’m sorry. Would you like something to eat?”

“Yes please.” She looked down for a moment and then at the man. “What happened to us?”

“You were in a car accident.” The man looked at the ground and shook his head. The girl felt sorry for him; he looked sad.

“My name is Karen.” She gave a slight smile as the man looked up. He gave a small smile in return.

“My name is Jonas. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“My mother’s name was Tracy;” Karen said, “Tracy Valentine. Tracy with a ‘y’.”

Jonas shook his head knowingly and stood. “I’ll get you some breakfast.”

Chapter Eleven

A Confession

“Forgive me Tracy.” Jonas said as he stood before her grave. A week had passed since her death, and her name had been added at the top of the inscription.

“Why do you blame yourself?” Lindsay’s voice startled him. He had not heard her walk up behind him. “There was nothing you could have done.”

Jonas turned to her. In his eyes was shame, as well as a strange look she could not identify. Bags had grown beneath his eyes from a week of sleepless nights. His face was pale, even though it was sunburnt. His appearance made part of her shudder, while another part pitied him.

“You cannot know,” he said after a moment, “the thing I have done.” There was desperation in his voice.

“Whatever it was,” she ventured, “you have absolved it. You saved Karen’s life.”

Jonas snorted, and then he grew serious. “Of that I can take no solace. If not for me, her life never would have been endangered.” He looked at her with the same strange look, glanced once more at the grave and then walked toward his motorcycle. She followed him.

As he mounted the bike, she stood a few feet away wondering what he could have done.

“Think of all I have told you and consider why this motorcycle still runs when strewn across the roadways of the world are billions of dead vehicles.”

“But our truck...”

“Is eighty years old. That is the only reason it was unaffected.”

“You knew?” She said with astonishment. He nodded his head. “But how?”

“Did I ever tell you I was from Atlantis?” He said as he started the motorcycle. He looked at her and laughed. She backed away in confusion, and he sped down the dirt road. The dust behind him blew into Lindsay’s face and made her cough. She stood unmoving until the motorcycle disappeared from view and then walked to the house.

She washed her face and hands and then walked to her room, to which Karen had been moved. It was empty. She walked to her parent’s room. It too was vacant, but as she turned to leave, she heard a girl’s laughter through the open window. Looking out, she smiled and then hurriedly left the room. Gone were the thoughts of Jonas and his strange words. Yes, on occasion she would think back and shudder at what he had said and wonder what exactly he had done and why, but at the present these things were far from her mind.

She knelt beside Karen as the girl joyfully patted Shadow on the head and Carl sat on the other side, glancing at the beginnings of a family and smiling. He pulled a carrot from his chest pocket and handed it to Karen. The girl held it out to Shadow and giggled as in taking it he nibbled on her fingers. Then Ghost sauntered up, placed her head through the fence and licked the Karen on the cheek. Everyone smiled.

Chapter Twelve

Conclusion

Jonas cranked the winch which lowered the sails and turned the rudder to halt the sailboat’s forward progress. When he was satisfactorily adrift, he leaned against the starboard railing and stared in disbelief. Then he pealed his head back and broke into a raucous bout of laughter.

He had easily acquired the sailboat and some maps for his motorcycle. That had been in Jacksonville. He could have easily gotten a lot more, or he could have been robbed. It was amazing; the entire purpose of the pulse device had been to prevent the war, but what was the one thing that people had that did not require electricity? Firearms. Yes, militaries had used lasers, pulse weapons and other various devices for decades, but they, of course, had stockpiles of traditional firearms stocked away just in case they were needed. This aside from the millions of civilians who still had the old firearms in their homes. And they had used them to no small effect. The United States had effectively been dissolved, for without communication, the government had no power. People fled the cities. Those that stayed counted the days until they ran out of food, hoping for a miraculous renewal of transport. A few of the ports received last

shipments from container ships which had been out to sea. Mobs effectively overran them and removed everything they could, from automobiles to satellite phones, now useless, to teddy bears. It was no different in the rest of the world. There were a few pockets that escaped, but they were areas scarcely populated and with little economic output. These places, in the past, had barely been able to provide for themselves; they could not be expected to provide for the entire world. Besides, they had been cut off. Global commerce was dead. Air traffic ceased. Only a handful of ships remained whom by luck had been out to sea. Still, what could they accomplish without goods to transport?

The entire system was derailed. Farming and mining had become completely mechanized. Few indeed knew even the theory of picking up a scythe or pick to harvest grain or mine metal, let alone had handled these ancient devices. And if they succeed in harvesting a portion of the crop, indeed it would take a grand population to harvest by hand all the fields machines had plucked so easily, then what? Did anyone know how to grind the fruit by hand to produce flour? It would have to be done. The machines would take years to fix or recreate, if ever it was done. Who was there that had the knowledge to recreate by hand the parts to fix even the most general of machines; one to fix another machine by which they could fix another machine and so forth until everything was as it had been? There was no one. Those that had fixed things previously had relied on other technologies to fix their specific machine. One could not fix a computer with a pair of pliers. One could not fix an automobile with a wrench or hammer. Oh yes, in the past these things could be done, back when mankind still made crude machines with great fuel fed engines, but not in a world of solar energy and circuit boards the size of pinheads. Man, stripped of his technology, was at a loss.

Everywhere Jonas had traveled he had observed the terrible disruption of human life. The streets remained cluttered with wreckage. Even a week and a half after the event, fires still burned in some towns. In one, as he sped through the maze of static vehicles, people on the sidewalks hurled stones at him. In another a bullet whizzed behind his back. He drove for two days without stopping. When he did finally rest, he rolled the motorcycle into the woods and even then feared someone had watched him. He slept in fits. On some roads, the dead lay untouched by human hands, rotting, eaten. It was wretched. He had laughed. Crows scattered into the sky with small bits of man in their beaks. He wished they would take him, but no, he had a mission. He would return to Atlantis and live like everyone else used to. He would sit in his office with his computer screen and his manna and laugh at all the poor wretches starving throughout the world. He would prop his feet on his footstool and watch a movie. He would ride the train around the island; god it would have been great to see one of those trains derail while they were traveling at eight hundred miles per hour. Or maybe he would kill the council members and make himself king of Atlantis; king Jonas the First. King Jonas the Merciful. King Jonas the

Terrible. Ha! What a lark. They would bow down before him; build a statue when he died and worship him like a god. He had killed thousands, nay millions, with nothing more than the flip of his hand; who else but a god could do such a thing? He, he, he. Ha, ha, ha.

Jonas stopped laughing. The boat rolled with the waves. The air smelt of death, and he wished, how he wished, he had made it back in time to have been on the island when the missiles struck. The first wave from the explosion rocked the boat violently, and he noticed a periscope where the missiles had sprung from the water. It vanished beneath the surface as the sound wave reached his ears. He leaned against the rail and gazed in the direction of Atlantis. A layer of smoke covered the islands. He laughed, more sedately now and returned to the wheel. He spun the wheel back and forth. He gathered his maps together and looked at them a moment before tossing them overboard. He raised the sails and then, closing his eyes, spun the wheel at random for a few moments before opening his eyes. He sighed and then headed below to attempt to sleep. He would end up somewhere.

The Unfinished Memoirs of Emperor Enic-ram

I am Enic-ram. This is the story of my fall from grace; or rather the tragic tale of my loss of power and dismissal by the world. Let me state first that many people hate me. They will attempt to blind you with trivial actions they hang upon me as if they were relevant. These people are envious. My name will outlast them by centuries, millennia. I shall be immortal.

“What of God?” you say. Bah! God will welcome me. Only He has conducted greater experiments on men than I. Sixty million people died because of Hitler. A trifle to the three hundred million my hand coerced to the grave. But God; He destroyed the entire population of the earth, save a handful. And for what? Because they sinned? No; of course not. For power. The same reason he destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah and hung the anvil over Nineveh. And these tell nothing of the great genius of God. Consider the billions that have died in the crusades of His many names. How many injustices have been done by His guidance? Yes, how He must laugh at the foolish men whom fight each other for His glory. How He stirs the hearts of all men against one another for his amusement. He tells them all different names and that no other will do. He is Allah. He is Zeus. He is Vishnu. The Great Sun. The Father of Jesus. Adonai. Ra. How masterly He pits us against one another. How wonderfully he twists mankind’s hearts and minds. But enough of God. His history is known. Countless books laud his name. Napoleon, Hitler, Caesar, Alexander, Genghis Kahn, Stalin; these all have their lines of death scrawled in thousands of books. Already my rise, my war and fall have been described by as many pens. Oh, how the people mourn and glory in my demise. How they make heroes of men that would be nothing except for me. Who would know the name of Nelson had not Napoleon existed? Churchill; Eisenhower; without Hitler they would no longer exist. Who would Jesus be without the devil? Nothing; forgotten. Peace does not exist without war. Order vanishes without chaos.

But enough conceit. Let me arrive at the reason why I write these memoirs. The simple answer is that I alone can tell the “why” of my actions. I will not repeat the many battles and speeches of which you will find in other books about me. I will not speak of the genocide, except for the political reasons behind it. I need not bother you with figures or contrite opinions of myself but merely attempt to form a picture of myself so that the “why” becomes more

apparent. Besides, I have not the time to recollect too much. My death impends. With such joy will the world cry when they take my life.

I. Let me begin by stating that I have never felt hate. Granted, I do not know that I have known love either. Simply, I never found anyone worthy of either feeling. I have known no equal. I have known this since I was a small child when I learned I could coerce my classmates to do anything. I began small. I had them steal for me; sweets; coins; toys; whatever struck my fancy. And often I did not even keep those things. I let them keep them, and thus they loved me more.

I remember one time I made three classmates hate another child. It did not take very long either before they began to torment the child and beat him. How I laughed at the simpletons. They never paused to consider why they hated the child. And the best part was that the child I taught them to hate came to me for guidance, and I led him along a grand path of destruction. It was my first war, and I played both sides, just like God. It went on for months before the three beat the other child so badly his parents pulled him out of school. I visited him at his home and pretended to commiserate with him. I riled him until he was wrathful, and when he had healed, I made him break into his enemies' homes and destroy their possessions. It was better than making him steal. He broke all their toys and tore their clothes. It was grand. I think that was when I was ten. It makes me smile even now.

Editor's Note – Unfortunately this is all Emperor Enic-ram had written when he was murdered in his cell by one of his guards. While no one mourns his passing, it would, perhaps, have been beneficial for the world community and the future generations of mankind to have known the “why” behind the actions of the man responsible for sinking the world into ten years of war and for the death of more than an estimated three hundred million people. What comes to light in the existing fragment is that Enic-ram was a man of extreme arrogance whom seemed to consider himself justified in using other people in any means and for any reason. That was the basis of his power; his ability to deceive people and use them to his own means. But what could any man gain from the death which spread under his empire? It appears, as ghastly as it seems, that he may have done it simply to see if he could. We, the remainder of humanity, were to him but playthings, and he broke as many of us as he could before we finally broke the spell of his silky tongue. But we cannot place the entire blame upon his shoulders, for we listened to his rousing words and did as he told us. He gave us someone to blame; so we took out our anger on the proffered heads. We believed his promises of national greatness in the selfish hope of personal gain; a thought he planted softly in our minds. Woe unto him for the wretchedness of his thoughts, but more so unto us for being used to make those thoughts reality.

Antarctic Dream

I

A warm breeze blew as the ship nudged against the pier and the crew bustled to secure the lines and lower the ramps. The passengers began to disembark almost immediately, but standing at the prow, James paid little attention to them, instead gazing upon the green, mountainous land before him.

“Do you want to go?” Susan asked. She stood beside him, their shoulders touching just enough so they could feel each other.

“Not yet,” James answered, “let the first rush pass. Besides it’s nice up here.”

“It’s so quiet too. Usually there’s such a crowd.”

Then they were silent for a few minutes. Susan turned from the land so the wind blew against her face and her hair flowed behind her. James continued to stare at the hills, and then he also turned.

“It’s amazing.” He said. “Fifty years ago those hills were covered with ice, and a hundred years before that the glaciers reached the sea. Now here we are ready to take a nice stroll along the Antarctic coast without so much as a jacket. There’s people down there wearing shorts.”

“It is summer down here. I’m sure the hills still get snow during the winter.”

“It’s not quite the same. Besides, there should be penguins here.”

“They have some at the aquarium.”

“Those are tame though. Anyway, I’m ready if you are.”

II

Twenty minutes later the young couple was walking along the cobblestone streets of Peace, Antarctica, one of three settlements on the internationally owned continent. Peace was primarily a tourist town, while of the other two, Unity was a scientific community and Prosperity was an agricultural site. The Antarctic soil, after being buried for so long, turned out to be extremely rich, and it was fortunate for world food supplies, for the same climate changes that had reopened Antarctica had destroyed a great deal of arable land in all six of the other continents. The Sahara, Gobi and various other deserts had grown significantly, while the growing seasons had been reduced throughout the traditional crop bearing regions. Both summer and winter in many places had

not only grown in length but severity. In some places spring and autumn lasted only a few weeks, or sometimes days. Like Antarctica in the south, however, much of the frozen north was now pleasantly habitable land. It seemed, to some, like the earth was driving men to new places so that the old, which had been exhausted, could be renewed, just as, perhaps, those now emerging from the ice and permafrost may have once needed regeneration and were thus sealed off from the common use of mankind.

“They sure milk people don’t they?” James was saying as they left a small curio shop. “I could buy everything they sell for a third the price back home.”

“It was no different in Hawaii. Face it; people know tourists will pay more for things.”

“It still doesn’t seem right.”

Susan laughed. That was one of the things she had always liked about James; there was an innocence to him. Often he seemed hurt when he saw people use or deceive each other. She kissed him on the cheek, and he took her hand.

“Let’s get out of town.” Susan said, turning to face James and taking hold of his shoulder with her free hand as if she wanted to dance. He put his arm around her waist and dipped her backwards. She laughed, and after he pulled her back up, they started running, slowly, out of town, holding hands and laughing.

It did not take long, the town was only a few short blocks, before they were running along a rocky beach to the east of town. Here they slowed to a stroll and watched as they walked by two children and their father throwing stones in the water. The mother sat a little distance behind them on a beach chair. They all were smiling.

Looking upon the family, James and Susan did not speak, but their thoughts were in the same place. They had been married for three years, and as both had recently turned thirty, thoughts and conversations of children had become more frequent, especially with their parents, whom, it seemed, desired to be grandparents. Susan started as if to speak but instead sighed.

“What?” James asked, half knowing.

“Not now. Let’s just enjoy ourselves. We’ll talk about it later.”

“Okay, but they make it look pretty nice, don’t they?”

“Yes.” And then they were silent again.

III

They had walked along the shore for more than an hour, chatting off and on of things neither found important but still were pleasant to discuss. They spoke of the rocks, the sea and again of penguins. (“I suppose if we walked far enough, we would find some.” Susan had said.) Then they walked up a small hill, away from the shore, so they could sit, rest awhile and enjoy the view. This they did, but after awhile James said he was getting hungry and they decided to head back.

They could see the town from where they were and decided it would be quicker to walk straight across the fields than along the shore. Susan's ankles were also sore from walking on the rocks.

They were debating whether to eat on the ship or at a restaurant when James, looking to his left, inland, interrupted Susan.

"Look, a cave. I'm sorry; go on."

She finished her statement about seeing a little restaurant that she wanted to eat at while they walked toward the cave. They stopped at its mouth.

"You want to go in?" James asked.

"It's too dark. Besides, we'd get dirty."

"You're right. But what do you think about coming out here tomorrow with a light and exploring?"

"Fine with me. It's better sitting on the ship or in town, but is it even worth it? It doesn't look that big."

James picked up a rock and threw it into the darkness. It sounded like it landed far away, as far as if he had thrown it towards the ocean.

"Seems big enough for at least a look." He said. "If nothing else we can bring a lunch up here and have a picnic."

"That would be nice." Susan said smiling. "If the weather is like today." Then they headed back to town for an early dinner.

IV

The next morning James made only a slight comment about the ridiculous mark-up as they emerged from the small drugstore in Peace. They stopped to put batteries in the flashlights they had just purchased to test them ("They had better work for the price." James had said.) and load them in a backpack with the picnic lunch. It was after eleven when James put the pack on and they headed out of town down the same road they had the day before. This time they turned up the hill they had descended the evening before, and while they had taken merely twenty minutes to walk from the cave to the town, it took over an hour the other way.

Below the cave was a gentle grassy slope, except where it neared the mouth; there, although for only a few feet, the ground was steep and rocky. James walked to the opening and peered into the darkness.

"Let's rest a bit first." Susan said, and he returned to the grass and set the backpack on the ground.

"Do you want to eat lunch?" He asked as he took a blanket from the pack.

"Maybe just a snack."

James spread the blanket on the ground, and they sat with legs outstretched, looking over the ocean. A light wind kicked up and overhead seagulls squawked. Susan opened a bag with crackers and cheese inside, and they began to eat.

"These are good." Susan said, breaking the silence after a few minutes.

"Should be, for the price. I'm sorry; I'll stop. Yes, they are good."

"It is nice up here too. This would be a nice place to have a house."

"I'm sure it won't be too long until someone does build here. It would be a bit of a shame, though. It's nice to be able to walk an hour off the boat and be entirely alone."

"Yes, it is." Susan lay back and looked at the sky and then closed her eyes as the sun, which had been behind a cloud, emerged. It felt good at first, but after she had lain in the sun for awhile, she was warm. "You want to go in now?" She asked. James had been lightly napping, his eyes slowly opening and closing with his breath.

He yawned when he spoke. "Might as well. Grab the flashlights."

At its mouth, the cave was slightly more than fifteen feet wide and perhaps ten feet tall, but by the time they had taken a dozen steps, they found themselves in a small cavern, a few dozen yards across, about twenty feet high and imperceptibly deep, as the ground was at an incline.

"Seems safe enough." Susan said. She had been in caves before, but this was more exhilarating. All those had been thoroughly explored by others, while this one, possibly, had never been entered. After all, it had been covered with ice until at least a hundred years ago, maybe even less than that. Still, it was close to town.

"Hold up." James said from behind her.

"What is it?"

"Look behind us."

"What about it?"

"The light is gone."

"So? We've been walking uphill. It's not a big deal."

"I know. It's just, if we turned the lights off, it would be entirely black."

They moved closer to each other and turned off the flashlights. For a moment the reminder of the light hung with their eyes, and then it faded and everything was empty. It was also silent. They had not noticed the quiet while they were walking, but without footsteps or voices, the only noise was their breathing.

"Creepy." James said after a few seconds, although it seemed much longer than that. His voice seemed without direction to Susan's ears, and though she knew he was near, she felt as if a gulf had risen between their bodies.

"Yes, but don't turn the light on just yet. There's something pure in the emptiness."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. There's something timeless. If someone was here alone, in the silent blackness, time would lose all meaning. The world would lose all meaning. There would be only thoughts and dreams. There would be only self."

"It would drive one insane."

“Yes, but still, there is something pure in it. Anyway, shall we?”

“Not quite. First, touch me.”

“Where are you? It’s hard to tell, even when you’re talking.”

Then she felt something warm on her skin, and though she knew it was his hand, she recoiled and shuddered. Then she reached out for him and found his arm. They drew close in an embrace, and in the emptiness it at once seemed almost as if they were one and if they were desperately apart for, except were they touched, the other person did not seem to exist.

James turned his light on. Susan did likewise, and they shone their lights upon each other’s faces.

“Creepy.” James reiterated.

“Definitely.”

“It made me jump when I touched you at first. I heard you talking, I knew you were there, but still it made me jump. It’s almost as if part of me expected you not to be there; as if you were just a voice.”

“I jumped too, but just for a second.”

“Do you want to go back?”

“Not yet, but let’s leave the lights on.”

“I wholeheartedly agree.” He smiled, and it seemed to Susan that his teeth remained even after she had moved her light from his face.

They continued uphill for a few minutes, and then the ground flattened and the cavern came to an end.

“It seems almost like a room,” James said, “the way it levels out like this, before the wall.”

He was following his light as he shone it about the flat area, but when Susan did not answer, he looked up, as one normally does to look at the person not answering. The beam of light from her flashlight was not moving. Naturally, he followed its path to the cavern wall, and then he stopped and slowly brought his light to shine with hers. They were silent for a moment.

“It can’t be.” James said. There was no response, but Susan’s light moved closer to the wall. He did likewise.

“It is.” She said. “It’s a door.”

V

It was indeed a door, and with amazement they examined it.

“Look, there is a carving above it.” James said as they trailed their lights about the edge of the doorway. The door was inset about two inches in the wall, which seemed peculiarly flat and smooth for a natural cave. If it had not been inset, it would have been nearly invisible. It was larger than a normal door, and showed no sign of hinges or a handle, so, as James observed, “It must open the other way.”

“It looks like writing.” Susan said as she looked at the carvings. “It’s hard to tell; they’re too high.”

The writing, if that is what it was, was about nine feet from the ground, as the door rose to about eight feet, and thus to get a good look at it, Susan had to sit on James’ shoulders. As such, she was able to examine the carvings closely, and after wiping the stone clean, although it seemed fairly clean for a cave already, she was even more confident that it was writing, although of a strange script she had never before seen.

“There’s a triangle, a smaller circle, something that looks somewhat between a capital and lower case dee and then it looks like a cross or a tee. That seems to be a word. Then the second word starts with a; I don’t know how to describe it. I guess a box with the two vertical lines extended upwards and the top horizontal line extended to the left. Then there’s a circle, the same as the other word, raised up a little. Then two horizontal lines, running a little under the circle. Then lastly two triangles, the first with the point facing down, the second with the point facing up, like the one in the first word. It seems to be just the two words.”

With that, James lowered her to the ground, and they shone their flashlights at each other as they spoke. Both sets of eyes glowed with excitement.

“So?” James asked.

“What?”

“Shall we?”

“Open the door?”

“Yes.” His face told that he wanted to.

“I don’t see why not; if we can. The wall seems stable enough.”

“All right. Hold my light, and I’ll give it a push.”

Susan backed a few yards from the door and shone both lights at it as James put his shoulder against it. He took a deep breath and pushed. There was the slight sound of rock sliding on rock, but the door did not seem to move. He pushed again. The same sound, and the door shifted just slightly.

“It’s no good by myself.” James said. “It would take all day.”

Susan handed him his light, and they both positioned themselves against the door. They put the flashlights in their pockets, shining up, so as to not be in total darkness, and then at Susan’s count, they began to push. At first the movement was very slight, and then, as if something on the other side had given way, the door swung open and they fell into a blinding light.

VI

The light was only blinding after so long spent in the darkness. Still, it took a few moments to regain their sight, and a few moments more before they believed their eyes for, truly, of all the things they might have imagined finding

beyond the stone door, that which they did find would never, absolutely never, have entered their minds.

The first thing they noticed, even in the few moments of blindness, was that they, when they tumbled over, did not land on the hard stone of a cave but rather something soft, which, as sight returned, they recognized as carpet. Raising then their eyes, their surprise increased a dozen fold. Firstly because they found themselves in a small library or study. The walls to their left and right were lined with finely crafted bookshelves filled entirely with exquisitely bound volumes marked in the same language as the writing above the door. The wall facing them was covered with tapestries depicting various natural scenes, except for an open doorway. But, though their eyes saw these things, they did not take them in for in the center of the room stood two arm chairs, with a table between, and rising from one of the chairs, a book falling from his hand and a surprised look on his face, was a large black bear.

James and Susan stared at the bear, and he stared at them, while a great many seconds passed away, and then the bear seemed to relax, and to the great surprise of James and Susan, he smiled. Then, to their even greater surprise, he spoke. The words were unintelligible at first, a strange tongue unlike any they had heard on earth; a mix it seemed of all languages, and then, as if knowledge they had never known existed within them surfaced in their minds, they understood.

“My, what a fright.” The bear had said, and he continued, still smiling in a way a normal bear cannot grin. His motions too were more human. “But please do get up. There’s no reason for you to continue lying there, unless you want to.”

James and Susan stood but did not move. The bear picked up his book and set it on the table. They stared at each other again for a moment. James scratched his chin and smiled slightly.

“This is awkward.” The bear said at last. “But there’s no need. Do you mind if we close the door a bit; not all the way of course; I don’t care much for darkness.”

“Okay.” James said after a pause. He was still considering whether to run, or whether he was dreaming, but he saw no reason to disagree with the bear, as long as he did not lock them in.

James turned to the door and realized why it had been so hard to open. This wall was also covered with tapestry, and the fabric had been torn by the opening door. He began to push on the door, but it did not move.

“Allow me.” Said the bear, and after James and Susan had backed away a little, he walked past them and easily closed the door until there was about a three inch opening. “There, that makes me feel better, and we can still open it to let you out. It’s strange that there is no handle, but I guess they probably took it off when they covered the wall. Anyway,” he turned to the humans, “where does it lead?”

“Into a cave.” Susan answered. She was feeling more comfortable, but still being that close to a bear, even one that seemed so nice, was unnerving. “Then out toward the ocean.”

“Do you mean the surface?” The bear said with a marveling look.

“Yes.” Susan answered. She looked at James, and he shrugged his shoulders as he gave a short laugh.

“Amazing.” The bear continued. “And the ice? I’ve always been told the surface was covered with ice.”

“It was until recently.” James answered.

“Amazing.” The bear reiterated. “But that can wait a moment. Please do sit down. Would you care for something to eat or drink?”

“Yes please.” They both answered. It did not seem polite to refuse, and they were both a little thirsty after their walk through the cave. The bear exited through the opposite door. James and Susan looked at each other.

“Is this real?” James said first.

“Seems so.” Susan could think of nothing else to say. She sat in one of the chairs. “Do you trust him?”

“Yes. If he wanted to hurt us, I think he would have done so by now. Besides, he left the door open. Honestly, I’m not sure what to make of this yet.”

“Me either, but I say we stay for at least a little while. This place is strange. I mean, I don’t see any lights anywhere, but it’s as bright as if there were a dozen lamps. It’s just right for this kind of room.”

James looked around for a moment and then sat in the second chair as the bear returned with a bowl of fruit in one hand, or paw, and a chair in the other. He set the bowl on the table and the chair facing James and Susan.

“Feel free to start. I’ll be right back with the drinks.”

The fruit, though similar to fruits they were accustomed to, was large and beautifully ripe. Susan took what looked like a large pear, although it had a slight purple hue. She took a bite and murmured in satisfaction.

“It’s delicious.” She said as the bear returned with three metal goblets. He set them on the table and then took one, as well as a large green fruit, and sat in the empty chair.

Silently they ate; strange new thoughts rising and falling in all three minds of new worlds and grand wonders. They drank the most refreshing water, and those unaccustomed to it marveled at its taste. Then James, turning to the bear, finally asked one of the many questions he had thought to ask.

“How does the fruit grow underground? There is no sunlight down here, is there?”

“No,” the bear responded, “but the light is natural and grows plants the same as the sun, if what I have read of the surface plants is true. Those books were quiet ancient, however, and may no longer be completely true. Do you have fruits such as these up there?” His face became excited when he spoke of the surface.

“Nothing quite the same.” Susan answered. “These are better, and larger, than the similar fruits on the surface.” It felt odd to refer to the surface of the earth as if it was another world.

“I should like to try them nonetheless.” The bear responded.

“You can, if you would like. There is fruit in our pack outside the cave. That way you could see the surface and the ocean.”

James gave her an odd look when she said this, as if he thought the invitation was a bad idea. Then he seemed to change his mind.

“We just need to be sure no one else sees you. Others would act quite differently if they saw a bear, even a talking bear, walking around.”

“Why?” The bear asked.

“Some people would be afraid. Others would want to kill you. Others would want to trap you and do experiments.”

“I do not understand. Why would anyone do these things? I have not harmed them in any way.”

“I don’t know how it is here, but to people where we come from that is irrelevant. To them you would be merely a beast, and thus not a person, and they would consider it well within their right to own and do whatever they felt like to you. Even if you were a man, they would want to ask you many questions and run many tests.”

“Why?” The bear could not comprehend. He understood the words, but the meanings he found in them were so far from anything he had ever witnessed, he could not fully understand. Susan gathered this more than James and felt sorry for the bear.

“Perhaps,” she said, “it would be best if you showed us your world first; then maybe we can explain it better.”

They all liked this idea, and they stood to leave.

“Before we go,” Susan said, “my name is Susan, and this is James.”

“I am called Jacques.” The bear responded, although it was different, more perhaps somewhere between Jox and Jax, except with a middle sound that does not exist in most human tongues. Irregardless, the way he said it, and the way they would say it, was much more beautiful than it would be said by anyone speaking any language other than the one they spoke; a language it seemed they had always known, probably everyone knows; the first language; the true language.

VII

From the study they passed into a hallway which, though there were still no lights, was a little dimmer than the study, just as a hallway should be. To the left and right were two doorways which revealed small bedrooms as they passed. Ahead of them was another doorway which shone with a brighter light. There

were no doors in any of the doorways. When they entered the light, James and Susan stood still with amazement.

“It’s beautiful.” Susan said after a moment. Stretching from the doorway where they stood was a vast green meadowland, dotted with fruit trees and partitioned by shallow streams which flowed to a large lake a few miles off. The land shone with the same mysterious light, but here its tone was that of early evening when everything gleams a little more than usual. The temperature was pleasant; soft was the word Susan later used; neither cold nor hot but a gentle warm. There was no wind, nor shadows, except directly beneath the trees. And it smelt like spring; of fresh blossoms, fruit and grass; of life renewed, as if awaking from winter slumber. Butterflies danced. Songbirds darted amongst the trees and twitted with seeming constant joy. There was movement across the lush plains; creatures familiar but free. Even at a distance, one could tell these things lived such as few in the world above even dared to dream.

“Is it always like this?” James asked with an astonished smile on his face.

“What do you mean?” Jacques asked and then answered his own question. “Oh, you mean the temperature, light and such? Yes, it is. I forget that you are used to living in a world of cycles; night and day; light and dark; warm and cold. Here it is always the same. There are no days, nights or years. One is simply born, then alive, then dead. There is no reason to divide life further; not here at least. Fruit is always plentiful; thus, no one is hungry. It is always warm; thus, no one is cold. There is always water and always light. One sleeps when tired, not because it is dark. It must be hard having so much of life affected by the revolution and orbit of the earth.”

“Being used to it,” James responded, “we don’t really notice, but nearly all human society has developed as a way to deal with those changes. Because there was darkness and cold, people were led to create shelter and clothing, as well as to control fire. Because of the repetition of day, night and season, man categorized the concept of time and divided his life by those observations. Because food was not always present, people learned to farm and hunt. As these things progressed, people formed groups; families, tribes, states; and as these arose so did power, guile and slavery. Men sought by all means to do less to obtain their shelter, clothing and sustenance, but in order for some to do less, it meant others had to do more. There arose hierarchies, rituals, religions, invention and much else. Tell me, Jacques, do humans live here?”

“Yes.”

“Do they have cities?”

“No.”

“Do they have government?”

“If by that you mean that a few individuals tell the majority what and what not to do; no. They all live the same as I.”

“And what do you do?”

“Whatever I desire.”

“But what if that desire harms someone else?”

“How could I desire anything that would harm someone else?”

“What if your neighbor had a larger house, and you desired it?”

“I own no house. No one does.”

“What is this then?” James pointed to the door behind him.

“A place to read books. All are welcome.”

“And where do you sleep?”

“Wherever I grow tired.”

“And everyone here lives as such; even the humans?”

“Yes.”

James smiled with bewilderment. Then his face grew quickly sullen. “Susan.”

“Yes?” She had gone a little distance off while James and Jacques were talking. She walked back eating a small ruby fruit she had just picked from a tree.

“We need to get our backpack. I mean, we need to either leave or stay, but either way, we need to close the door.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just think for a moment what would happen if other people found out about this place. It would be destroyed. I do not want to be responsible for bringing them here.”

“But I don’t want to go yet.”

“I’m not sure I ever want to go, but we need to at least get our pack so no one finds them and goes in the cave.”

“Okay, but we won’t close the door all the way yet. Are you serious about staying? I was considering it myself.”

“Yes, but we do not have to decide now. Jacques, would you like to go out with us?”

“Yes,” the bear answered, “but why do you speak of closing the door?”

“To prevent anyone else from finding it.”

“Because you fear their actions?”

“Yes.”

“But what if the next people were peaceful; then you would be depriving them of a land you consider better than your own.”

“This is paradise. Even the best intentioned people who have lived such as we have will ruin it. Even, I’m afraid, us.” He turned to Susan. “We can’t stay, can we?”

“No. We’ve lived too long in a corrupt world to live now in a place this pure. We would be sure to taint it.”

VIII

Jacques, for never having been in the dark before, seemed to take no notice of the new experience, save for a single comment about feeling like he was asleep, even though he knew full well that he was awake. When they reached the mouth of the cave, James went out first to make sure no one else was in sight, and when he called for Susan and Jacques to join him, his voice was excited.

Slowly they exited the cave. Susan stopped when she realized why James was so eager for them to join him. Jacques continued walking, and as he passed Susan, his face overspread with awe. Such a sight she had never witnessed as to watch the bear walk from her into the setting sun and sit silhouetted in silence as around him spread the sky and sea lit up in color. James walked to her side and put his arm around her and quietly the three watched the sun disappear behind the world's edge. Even when the last ray had dropped below the horizon, they did not move or make a sound but rather turned their gaze toward the heavens to marvel at the brilliant stars revealing themselves in the black emptiness of the sky.

At length the black shadow padded his way to the humans. Silent still, they formed a line and entered the cave. Only as they approached the door did Susan break the silence as she shone her light once more upon the writing above the door.

"All are welcome." She read.

Silence. Jacques entered the light and turned to the humans.

"Are you coming in?" He asked.

"No." James answered.

"No." Susan confirmed.

Silence, and then the door slid shut. Susan's light still hung upon the writing which slowly turned into a series of unintelligible symbols.

"We can't cover it." She said.

"No, but I fear what will happen the next time someone finds it." They began to make their way back through the darkness. "There is a part of me that wants to stay there."

"That is exactly why we cannot stay."

"Why?"

"Because there is a part that is too attached to the life we have lived thus far. We could never be happy there such as those that live there now, just as we, at least I, will never be quite so happy as I was in our old way of life. But..."

"What?"

"Well, I think we may have been given a glimpse of a more pure life. It means life, even human life, is capable of a much greater existence than in which we live. It gives me hope."

IX

It was quite late by the time James and Susan reached their cabin on the cruise ship. They had spoken very little since leaving the cave, nor would they speak of their experience for many days, although they would on occasion look at each other and share a secretive smile. Only on their last day docked at Peace did James broach the subject.

“We are leaving port tomorrow morning.” He said.

“Yes. So?”

“It’s our last chance to go back.”

“Is that what you’ve been thinking about?”

“Some of the time, yes. I would like to make sure it was real.”

“Of course it was, but we cannot go.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because of all the reasons we did not stay in the first place, and because...”

“Because what?”

“I had a dream.”

“What does that have to do with it?”

“Because in my dream I saw the destruction of that place, and you and I were there. If we go back, we will bring with us the plague that is mankind. We may have already.”

She was weeping as she recalled her dream, and as he listened, James wept too for he realized he had also had the dream, but he had not remembered it and thus blindly would have gone back. Actually, he realized, he had remembered the dream at first but had selfishly pushed it from his mind. Thus he also wept for his own desires.

This is what they dreamt:

Amongst the wild groves of fruit trees a black bear sat gazing over a great lake, smiling. Beside him two squirrels laughed as they shared a large golden fruit. Nearer the lake a woman and a child danced in circles, singing a beautiful song which praised the warmth of Nature and the Perfect hand of the Creator. At the shore of the lake various creatures were assembled. Some were sleeping, others talking merrily, while a few played in the shallow waters along the shore. Then there was a thundering sound and from above a ray of darkness fell upon the land of eternal light. And from in this darkness stepped James and Susan, followed by a stream of men whom looked about the world before them and smiled greedily upon the innocent inhabitants and gleaming fields. Then everything was dark for a moment.

When the light returned, the world had changed. The fruit trees, which before had grown at random, had been conformed to lines, and amongst these rows were hundreds of penguins harvesting the fruit. Men walked amongst them with whips and showered curses upon the fragile beasts. One bird fell

from a tree, and as he lay injured, a man approached and lashed him until he bled. He then called forth two badgers, who walked with sallow faces, to dig a hole and place the dead bird within. The man then whipped the badgers as they filled the grave and made them take the fallen bird's places among the trees. Then, towards the lake there was a clamor of men, and spouting from the ground, flowed the black stench of oil. Men danced around the fountain of crude and threw butterfly wings into its forming pool. Then everything was again dark.

When the light again returned, it was faint and hovered about an empty place. The lake was nearly empty, and the water which remained was stagnant and polluted with carcasses, metal, stone and plastic. Ruins of oil derricks and industrial buildings covered the landscape. There was silence. The light waned, and with a loud crash the roof of the great cavern collapsed. Everything was rubble; a mix of decay and unchanging filth. Then a single sprout began to grow. Soon it was a young tree laden with fruit which fell and grew into new trees, which grew new fruit; and so life spread until it engulfed the decay. Grass grew beneath the trees. Birds began to sing, silently, hidden at first, but then they began to fly from tree to tree, dancing on a gentle breeze. Other animals began to run amongst the trees; rabbits, deer, lions; all were happy again. Then a bear was seen sitting, watching the sun halt in its course, just so the light was perfect and the world was warm, just as the cavern had always been. Then the bear vanished and in his place stood the shining figure of an angel brandishing in his hand a flaming sword. And behind him the animals danced with joy and shouts of grace, but among them was not one human being.

